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STATE OF THE GAME

BEST PUNCHER: NAOYA INOUE

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FUELED BY CRUSHING KNOCKOUT POWER AND SUPERB BOXING SKILLS, JAPANESE STAR NAOYA INOUE'S BLAZING ASCENT TO ELITE STATUS IS CREATING TALK OF WORLDWIDE FAME
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OPENING SHOT

Daniel Jacobs used a stick-and-move strategy to neutralize Sergiy Derevyanchenko's methodical pressure during their hotly contested bout on October 27, but the Brooklyn native also stood his ground and attacked his gym mate enough to earn a split decision and the vacant IBF middleweight title.

PHOTO BY AL BELLO

STYLES MAKE FIGHTS

Creed II premiere in New York City: 1. Sylvester Stallone and Michael B. Jordan; 2. Steven Caple Jr., Tessa Thompson and Florian Munteanu; 3. Bernard Hopkins; 4. Dolph Lundgren; 5. Michael Buffer; 6. Roy Jones Jr.

TWEET OF THE MONTH

Tony Bellew
@TonyBellew

It is time for me to finally leave the ring, the bell has rung for the final time and I want to thank you all for the support you have given me over the years, it is not the end of my story though so keep an eye on bomberbellew.co.uk #bomberbellew #retirement

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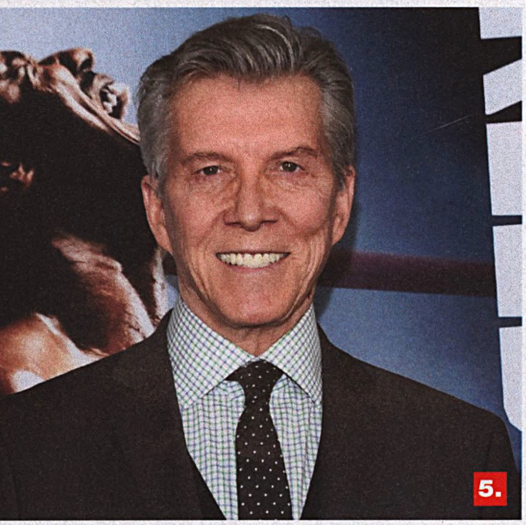

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Come Out Writing, The Ring, P.O. Box 90254, Brooklyn, NY 11209 comeoutwriting@gmail.com ★ Emailed letters will include a writer's email address unless a city and state of origin are provided. Letters may be edited for reasons of space and clarity.

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Pictured left to right: Damon Allen Jr., Jessie Vargas, Fernando Vargas

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FOUNDER
Nathaniel Fleischer (1888-1972)

PUBLISHER
Stefan Friedman

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Douglass Fischer

MANAGING EDITOR
Brian Harty

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Lamar Clark

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Tom Gray

CONTROLLER
Deborah L. Harrison

CIRCULATION DIRECTOR
Kenneth J. Gudaitis

ADVERTISING INQUIRIES
Advertising@sepublications.com
215-643-3069

SUBSCRIPTION INQUIRIES
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Sports and Entertainment Publications
P.O. Box 433122
Palm Coast, Fl 32164-3122
800-846-6438
thering@emailcustomerservice.com

SEND EDITORIAL COMMENTS TO:
comeoutwriting@gmail.com
or P.O. Box 90254
Brooklyn, NY 11209

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MORE ISN'T ALWAYS BETTER

The State of the Game analysis in this issue includes some positive speculation on what could unfold in certain divisions, particularly those that feature top talent, in 2019.

The hope is that the best-facing-the-best trend sparked by the World Boxing Super Series continues outside of the successful tournament format, and much of that glass-half-full outlook comes from the incredible volume of boxing brought on by the sport's rapidly changing landscape, as detailed in our cover story last month. Four networks/platforms – ESPN/ESPN+, Fox/FS1, DAZN and Showtime – have made multi-year commitments to the sport through partnerships with major promotional companies that will result in more than 150 live boxing events televised or streamed in 2019.

That's A LOT of boxing, but the increased ring action won't be an improvement unless the right fights are made between world-class and elite boxers. Hardcore fans know the elite matchups they want to see most are often delayed for years or not made at all due to network alliances and promotional rivalries, which is why few are holding their breath for Errol Spence vs. Terence Crawford or Vasiliy Lomachenko vs. Mikey Garcia.

There's cause for some hope over the next 12-18 months as the potential for elite showdowns and title unification bouts exists within certain "boxing leagues." Al Haymon, who is partnered with Showtime and Fox, advises four of The Ring's top five welterweights (Spence, Keith Thurman, Shawn Porter and Manny Pacquiao). The Ring's top two junior middleweights (Jarrett Hurd and Jermell Charlo) and featherweights (Leo Santa Cruz and Gary Russell Jr.) are also part of Haymon's Premier Boxing Champions. One figures Fox's and Showtime's combined license fees and show dates could lead to some sensational fights and the crowning of at least one Ring champ in 2019. However, the PBC on Fox "upfront" presentation didn't leave longtime fans with much faith.

The centerpiece of Fox's first-quarter schedule announcement was the March 16 Spence-Garcia pay-per-view fight. No disrespect to Garcia, who's taking a big risk in facing The Ring's No. 1-rated welterweight, but why is Spence fighting a lightweight when Porter and Thurman – two perfectly healthy 147-pound titleholders – shared the stage with him at Fox headquarters?

Instead of proving who's the best welterweight in the PBC stable, Thurman makes his long-delayed ring return against gatekeeper Josesito Lopez on January 26. At least Porter will face a legit welterweight contender, Yordenis Ugas, on March 9. But why can't Porter, one of the few welterweights unafraid to bring up Spence's name, get a shot at the undefeated Texan?

And why the hell hasn't Santa Cruz-Russell been made? After their title defenses against Abner Mares and Joseph Diaz Jr. in 2018, "unification" is all we heard from them and Showtime's pundits.

But Santa Cruz faces no-hoper Miguel Flores on February 16. WHY!? And what's up with Russell? If he continues his once-a-year fight schedule, his lone appearance in 2019 better be against Santa Cruz.

These guys aren't in their mid-20s anymore. Spence is 28. Russell, Santa Cruz and Thurman are 30. Porter is 31. Time is running out, as is fans' patience.

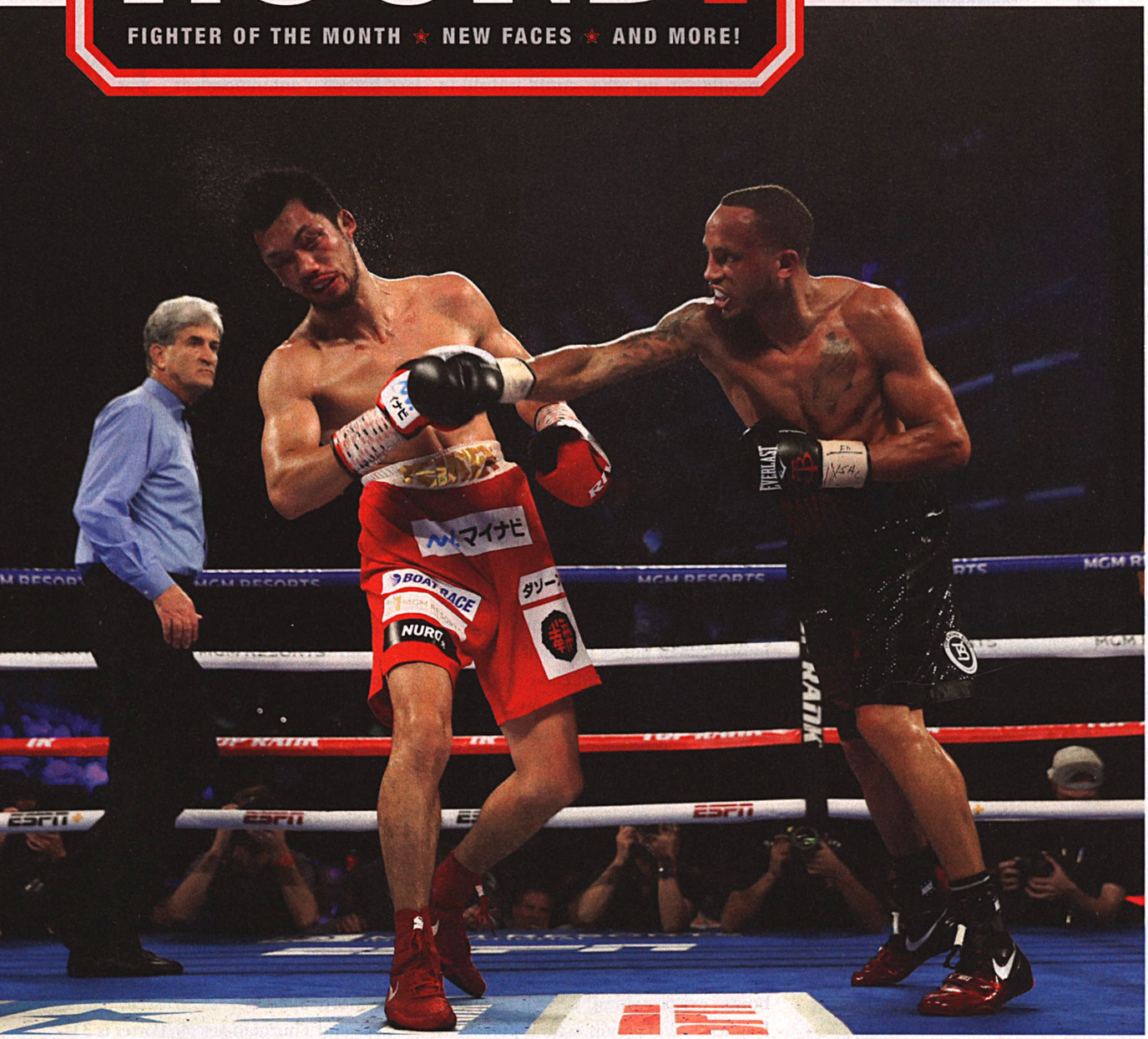
This column isn't meant to single out the PBC. Top Rank has to either work out deals to bring elite talent to ESPN to face Lomachenko and Crawford, or it needs to allow the two stars of its stable to fight on other platforms.

DAZN has Canelo, Demetrius Andrade and Daniel Jacobs. Those three middleweights hold all four major world titles. And like the PBC players, their ages range from 28 to 31.

Let's see some damn unifications, folks, while these guys are still in their primes!

ROUND 1

FIGHTER OF THE MONTH ★ NEW FACES ★ AND MORE!



ROB BRANT

You can forgive the boxing world for looking past Ryota Murata's ESPN+ showcase fight against Rob Brant to an anticipated 2019 showdown between Murata and Gennady Golovkin. In Brant's only previous fight against a legit contender, he was outclassed by veteran Juergen Braehmer in a WBSS super middleweight quarterfinal last October. Murata, strong but limited, had at least earned contender status with a stoppage of Hassan N'Dam that same month. One year later, the 32-year-old Olympic gold medalist from Japan established a ghoulish Halloween vibe on October 20 at Park MGM in Las Vegas by stalking Brant with Michael Myers-like relentlessness, often flashing a bloody smile after eating a one-two combination from the 28-year-old American. However, Brant (24-1, 16 KOs) set the pace of the fight by throwing 136 punches in Round 1 and aiming 100 or more shots at Murata's stationary head in nine of the 12 entertaining rounds. The Minnesotan, who won by scores of 119-109 (twice) and 118-110, outworked Murata (with 1,262 punches, the second-most ever recorded by CompuBox in a middleweight fight) and *outboxed* the odds favorite, limiting the Japanese star to 180 total punches landed. Golovkin-Murata is off, but we'll get more Brant on ESPN, as he has signed a co-promotional deal with Top Rank.

NEW FACES

JOSHUA BUATSI

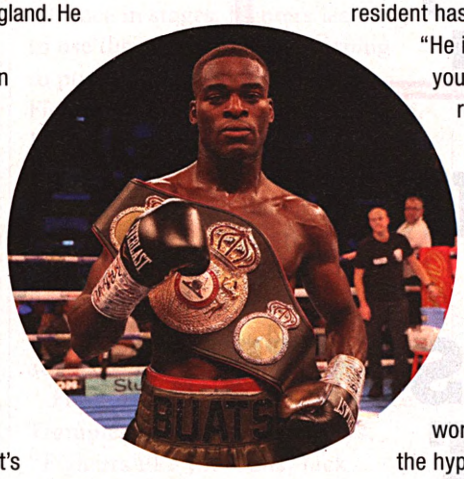
By **Anson Wainwright**

Big-punching light heavyweight Joshua Buatsi was born in Tema, Ghana, a neighboring city to the boxing hotbed of Accra. When he was 9 years old, his parents made the decision to expand their son's horizons and move to England. He adapted quickly to his new surroundings.

"The primary aim was to get a better start in life, for educational purposes," Buatsi, now 25, told The Ring. "I grew up on an estate in Croydon called Shrublands.

"I had no interest in boxing until I was 15. My best mate came over with gloves, and everyone had a go at it. Out of everyone there, he was ahead of everyone because he did a bit of boxing, and I noticed there was a skill to fighting. We could all fight, but he had an extra edge knowing a bit of boxing – the next level from street fighting to developing boxing skills. That's when I thought, 'I do want to give boxing a go.'

"That's why when I turned around and said I want to do a bit of boxing, my parents said, 'We brought you from Ghana to here, and you turn around and say you want to box.' It's quite backwards."



Buatsi knows he's in a deep and dangerous weight class.

Buatsi wasn't put off, and his parents soon relented. The personable youngster visited the nearby South Norwood and Victory Boxing Club and found his feet training with Mark Gillespie, who still works with him today.

Buatsi quickly excelled and joined the Team GB squad. He won back-to-back ABA titles in 2014 and 2015, and gained international experience winning bronze at the 2015 European Championships. That same year, he fought at the World Championships and lost to eventual gold medalist Julio Cesar la Cruz. At the 2016 Olympics, he won bronze.

The Olympic experience proved to be life-changing. However, to his immense credit, Buatsi remained grounded.

"In the amateurs, I was always traveling around the world knocking out people, but because it's not televised, nobody really sees it," he explained. "They can't appreciate how hard you're working. So for me, the Olympic stage was the perfect opportunity ... I'm grateful to God everything came in line for the whole world to see what I can do. Everything fell into place at the right time.

"I kind of went from zero to hero in the sense that when you haven't won anything to fighting globally, only your close friends know how you're doing. It was a big transition in terms of the interest that there was in me."

Just two weeks after returning home, he was back attending lectures at St. Mary's University, eventually completing his degree in management and sports science.

All the while, he was fielding offers to turn professional. After weighing his options, he elected to sign with promotional juggernaut Matchroom and manager Anthony Joshua, with whom he maintains a close relationship.

"It's still fighting and boxing, but it's different," he said of his transition to the pro ranks. "The workload really increased; it becomes your life. Amateur boxing is a sprint, but professional boxing is a marathon. You have to pace yourself, take your time, know when to sprint, know when not to sprint."

Respected boxing guru Eric Armit, who writes for a handful of outlets around the world, believes the Ghanaian-born British resident has considerable upside.

"He is definitely one of the most promising young boxers in Britain," said Armit. "He has real power in both hands, is a devastating body puncher and a clinical finisher.

"As an amateur he went from relatively unknown in 2015 to an Olympic bronze medal in Rio, so a relatively short time at the top level in amateur boxing. All he really needs now is experience to fill any gaps. I think he can go all the way to a world title."

Buatsi appreciates that there is much work to be done and isn't getting caught up in the hyperbole surrounding him.

"There's some real killers in my weight category," he said. "My sole concern is that I have to be ready when I get to that level. Don't be rushed, don't cut corners, do the right things so when you get to that level, you won't be found out."

Last time out, Buatsi impressively vanquished the usually durable Tony Averlant in the first round, putting him down twice with hooks to the body.

"You start and say you want to be a world champion, but right now my goal is to win my next fight," said Buatsi of his future plans. "It's really as simple as that. As an amateur you have to win your next fight to progress on, so right now that's my aim."

There will be obvious comparisons between Buatsi and his unbeaten countryman Anthony Yarde, but while the pair may be on a collision course, it doesn't figure to happen anytime soon, due to promotional differences.

When asked to comment on Yarde needing seven rounds to stop Averlant eight months earlier, Buatsi said, "I always say styles make fights. Just because one guy dealt with another guy quicker doesn't mean a lot, because it's how your styles gel when you meet in the ring.

"I don't have any bad feeling toward anyone. I'm a fighter, he's a fighter, and people think, 'These two are good.' It's as simple as people want to see the fight, and when the time's right, we'll get in and fight. It's just a matter of time.

"Boxing's not personal or having a grudge. If people disrespect you, that's fine, because when you get in that ring you get to beat them up. That's payback." RING

Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

JABS AND STRAIGHT WRITES

BY THOMAS HAUSER

COMPARING TODAY'S FIGHTERS WITH THE PAST

Modern boxers, more than athletes in other sports, suffer from comparisons with the past. No one looks at Los Angeles Angels superstar Mike Trout and complains, "He isn't as good as Mickey Mantle was." People accept and appreciate Mike Trout for what he is. And that's true of other sports. But in boxing, elite fighters are constantly judged against their long-ago predecessors and hear, "So-and-so would have beaten him."

At times, boxing fans over-romanticize the past. Previous "golden ages" of boxing weren't always so golden. There was a five-year period from 1932 to 1937 when the heavyweight championship resided with Jack Sharkey, Primo Carnera, Max Baer and James Braddock. The light heavyweight

Vasiliy Lomachenko, currently No. 1 in The Ring's pound-for-pound rankings, could have competed with the best boxers of any past era.

champions immediately preceding Billy Conn included Bob Olin, John Henry Lewis and Melio Bettina. I could go on. And on.

Was Benny Leonard a great fighter for his time? Absolutely. But put Benny Leonard in his prime (his prime being the 1920s) in the ring against Vasiliy Lomachenko, and I'm betting on Lomachenko. That's not to say that Lomachenko is as great in his era as Leonard was in his. It's to say that times change.

Terence Crawford, Vasiliy Lomachenko, Canelo Alvarez, Gennady Golovkin, Errol Spence and their brethren would have been competitive in any era. They might not have beaten the best, but they would have been competitive against them. The same holds true for Andre Ward, Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Bernard Hopkins.

Was Ray Leonard (who peaked in the 1980s) better than any welterweight fighting today? Absolutely. But Ray Leonard was also arguably better than any welterweight ever except Sugar Ray Robinson.

By and large, athletes today are better than their counterparts were decades ago. Babe Ruth is widely regarded as the greatest baseball player ever. Put Ruth in the game now against pitchers who are attacking him with forkballs, sliders, fastballs, split-finger fastballs, two-seam fastballs, cut fastballs, curveballs, knuckleballs and changeups, and I doubt that he'd have a .342 career batting average. The men who won gold medals in swimming at the 1932 Olympics wouldn't have qualified for the women's finals at the past three Olympic Games.

Where do boxers fit into the equation?

Today's fighters are better conditioned than their predecessors as a consequence of advances in nutrition and conditioning technique.

Boxing technique is a different matter.

"You can look back over time and see how technique evolved," trainer-commentator Teddy Atlas offers. "It didn't happen all at once. You see it advance in stages. Fighters learning to use their legs. Fighters learning to punch effectively to the body. Fighters learning to move their head. Jack Johnson was a great pioneer for black people. But he was also a great pioneer in blending defense with offense and controlling the distance between himself and his opponent. Benny Leonard made history as a great Jewish fighter, but he also advanced boxing technique."

Hall of Fame matchmaker Bruce Trampler is in accord and says, "Fighters like Joe Gans, Jack Johnson and Benny Leonard had skill sets that were advanced for their era but wouldn't be today. I think the post-war 1940s and 1950s were the era when, overall, fighters had the best technique. I don't think there have been any significant breakthroughs in technique since then."

As for today, Trampler declares, "The knowledge is still available. But I don't think fighters today are as well-rounded as a group as they once were. The coaching is inferior to what it used to be, so most fighters aren't being taught what they should be about technique."

And there's another factor in play today that has led to a decline in the number of great fighters.

Athletes in all sports get better when they compete against the best. In tennis, for example, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic have learned from their battles and pushed each other to new heights.

When boxing was boxing (as the saying goes), fighters had to go in tough and beat other, equally talented fighters to be considered great. But boxing's current business model deprives fighters of the opportunity to prove and improve upon their skills by fighting other great fighters. Now slick PR and marketing create the illusion of greatness.

In that regard, Teddy Atlas observes, "No matter how good a trainer a fighter has, no matter how hard he works in the gym, a fighter learns what's most important about the craft of boxing in fights. There's no teacher like the fight itself. And the problem we have today is that the priorities aren't centered around fighters learning the craft of boxing. They're about navigating a fighter to a belt and getting him a name while traveling down the easiest path possible. And that hurts, because tough, hard, great fights make great fighters, and tough, hard, great fights make great fighters greater.

"Ray Leonard became a greater fighter because of what he learned fighting Roberto Duran," Atlas continues. "Then he took what he learned fighting Duran and used it to beat Thomas Hearns. After that, he took what he learned fighting Duran and Hearns and it helped him beat Marvin Hagler. And he fought Wilfred Benitez before he fought any of those guys. It was the hard fights, not the easy ones, that led Leonard to understand that there was always one more move he could make and taught him how to make that move to turn things around and win. Great fighters aren't born great or trained to greatness, although, obviously, natural physical gifts and a good teacher are important. Great fighters are forged in the fire." RING

Thomas Hauser's new email address is thomashauserwriter@gmail.com. His most recent book – Protect Yourself at All Times – was published by the University of Arkansas Press. In 2004, the Boxing Writers Association of America honored Hauser with the Nat Fleischer Award for career excellence in boxing journalism.

BEST I FACED

BY ANSON WAINWRIGHT

FIGHTING HARADA

Whatever Masahiko Harada may have lacked compared to the natural talent of his contemporaries, he more than made up for it with his spartan work ethic. In a 10-year professional career that spanned the 1960s, he was flyweight and bantamweight champion during an era of only 10 weight classes.

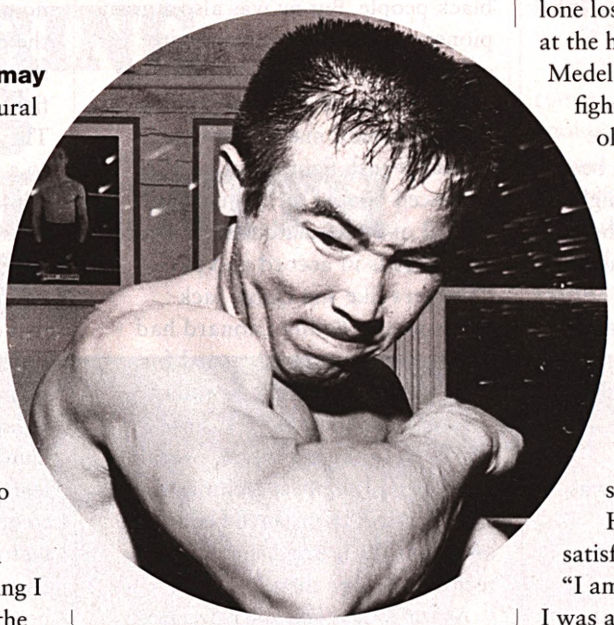
After finishing middle school, Harada started to work at a rice store. However, he felt he needed to do something else to bring money into the family.

"My family was poor," Harada told The Ring, "and I felt in boxing I could become one of the best in the world without education."

The Sasazaki Gym was nearby, and after visiting he joined immediately. Interestingly, he had no amateur career. Just a couple of months shy of his 17th birthday, Harada turned professional.

"I do not believe I was born with a fighter's talent and skill," he said modestly. "When I first started boxing as a professional, there were three of us in the flyweight class that were rivals: Katsutoshi Aoki, Hiroyuki Ebihara and myself. They called us the three crows of the flyweights.

"Among the three of us, I believe I was the least talented. Ebihara had his 'razor punch' and Aoki had his 'megaton punch' named after their powerful punches. I think I was able to beat them from training harder than anyone and not losing the will to win."



It didn't take long for Harada to live up to his "Fighting" nickname.

Harada was given the nickname "Fighting" by Takeshi Sasazaki, who was the president of the gym. Harada wanted to fight under a different name and at first he was embarrassed by the moniker, but he got used to it.

Harada won his first 12 fights before meeting rival Ebihara, besting his compatriot over six rounds. Just over two years into his career, he lost for the first time when he dropped a decision to Mexican gatekeeper Edmundo Esparza in June 1962.

He got back to winning ways before facing the legendary Pone Kingpetch for the WBA flyweight belt. Harada boxed his way into a lead and punctuated the victory with an 11th-round stoppage to earn his first world title at just 19 years old.

The Thai paymasters enticed Harada to travel to Bangkok for a rematch just three months later, and Kingpetch exacted revenge with a majority decision to regain his title.

Having been dethroned, Harada decided to migrate to the bantamweight division. Over the next two years, he went 11-1 (the lone loss was a six-round stoppage at the hands of seasoned veteran Joe Medel). During his march to a title fight, Harada stopped another old rival, Aoki.

Harada's backers brought exceptional bantamweight champion Eder Jofre, who was unbeaten in 50 contests (47-0-3), to Japan in May 1965. The classy Brazilian was surprisingly unseated by the swarming, all-action challenger, who eked out a split 15-round decision. Harada considers it his most satisfying victory.

"I am most proud of the fact that I was able to beat a great champion like Jofre," he said.

Harada successfully turned back the gallant challenge of Alan Rudkin, then repeated the Jofre victory, this time by unanimous decision, before gaining revenge over Medel and outpointing Bernardo Caraballo. In early 1968, he surprisingly lost his title to Lionel Rose.

Harada moved up again in weight, this time to featherweight, and traveled to Australia to face WBC beltholder Johnny Famechon.

The diminutive Japanese fighter gave the Australian all he could handle in a closely fought bout. At the conclusion of 15 rounds, the sole scorer was former featherweight legend Willie Pep, who also refereed the contest. After initially scoring it a draw, Famechon was announced as the winner.

The WBC pressed for a rematch,

and it came six months later in Japan. On this occasion, Famechon stopped Harada in the penultimate round.

After losing the rematch to Famechon, the Japanese star elected to retire at just 26 with an impressive record of 55-7 (22 knockouts). He remained involved in boxing and opened the Fighting Harada Gym, where he still trains and teaches daily. He also worked as a commentator for Nippon TV. In 1989, he became the president of the Japan Boxing Promoters Association, a role he filled for seven terms over 21 years. In 1996, he was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

Fellow Hall of Famer and Japanese boxing doyen Joe Koizumi speaks glowingly of Harada.

"Fighting Harada used to be our national hero," Koizumi said. "Everyone knew him, as he always entertained the crowd and TV watchers with his nonstop punching. His fights with Eder Jofre, Joe Medel, Pone Kingpetch, Johnny Famechon were so classic that we will never forget his great impact.

"Fighting Harada is our fistic symbol."

Harada, now 75, is the lifetime honorary chairman of the JBPA. He lives in Yokohama with his wife of 48 years, Iyo. They have two sons.

He spoke to The Ring about the best opponents he fought in 10 key categories.

BEST JAB

Joe Medel: He hit with a fast and accurate Jab.

BEST DEFENSE

Eder Jofre: Jofre had a very tight peek-a-boo defense, while Medel had very elusive footwork. Though their styles and skills were different, both had excellent defense.

BEST CHIN

Jofre: When I was fighting, there were so many fighters in my weight class that would not go down. It is hard to name just one. If I had to bring up one, it would have to be Jofre. We fought 30 tough rounds and he did not go down. Being able to withstand the powerful Jofre, I have to say I had a pretty good chin myself.

FASTEST HANDS

Medel: His quick counterpunches were invisible. But if I have to bring up names, Famechon and my first title defense opponent, Alan Rudkin, also had fast hands.

FASTEST FEET

Johnny Famechon: In my first challenge for his title in Sydney, I knocked him down three times. But he had fast running feet, and I was not able to finish him off. After the fight, the lone judging referee (Pep) scored the fight as a draw. But they reversed the verdict after the initial announcement. Still, to this day, I believe I won that fight.

SMARTEST

Jofre: Jofre and Medel both were great boxers. But if I have to choose, I would have to choose Jofre. Medel was great. He was not fearful if you did not go to him. Medel had one win and one loss with me, but he never beat Jofre in the two title challenges he had with him. With Jofre, I won both of my fights. It seems strange.

STRONGEST

Jofre: I had him on the verge of a knockout in the fourth, and he came out in the fifth to have me on the verge of being knocked out. Fierce opponent.

BEST PUNCHER

Jofre: Jofre's power-punching was beyond description. Katsutoshi Aoki had a great punch, too. I predicted Jofre's and Medel's powerful punches. They were sharp, and I was frantic not to get knocked out.

First fighter to knock me down was Medel. It was not so much the power in his punches, but the ability to time the counterpunches. He was a defensive fighter, and if you did not throw punches, you had no fear of being knocked down – but there would not be a fight, either. So I chose to be the aggressor. I lost the first fight. But it was a different situation when he was the champion. I did not need to go out and throw punches unnecessarily. When I challenged for the championship, I was able to win decisively.

My rival Aoki could punch. We fought in 1964 and I won in the third round by KO. But in the first round, Aoki hit me with a left that almost would have erased that win. He was a genius puncher. He used to brag that he did not have to train to win. Facing such an opponent, and training harder than anyone, there was no way I would lose. Even though it was a non-title fight, it was selected as the fight of the year in Japan.

BEST SKILLS

Jofre: When I challenged him for the first time in 1965, no one predicted that I would beat the unbeaten champion, and it actually was a tough fight. I had moments where I almost had him out (fourth round), but there were moments where he almost had me out (fifth round). It was like a dream to beat Jofre. Starting with Jofre, my era had many great bantamweight fighters. Because of them, "I have to train harder" is what I told myself as I trained. I am very appreciative of these men for giving me the motivation to be better.

BEST OVERALL

Jofre: Without a doubt, the overall best was Jofre.

The Ring wishes to thank Boxing Beat magazine, Makoto Maeda and Joe Koizumi for their assistance helping make this feature possible.

Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

RATINGS

POUND FOR POUND ★ RATINGS ANALYSIS ★ THE RING RATINGS

Aleksandr Usyk used a busy and educated jab to soften Tony Bellew up before their bout's violent eighth-round conclusion.

POUND FOR POUND

1 **VASILIY LOMACHENKO**
Ukraine • 11-1-0 (9 KOs)

2 **TERENCE CRAWFORD**
U.S. • 34-0-0 (25 KOs)

3 **CANELO ALVAREZ**
Mexico • 50-1-2 (34 KOs)

4 **ALEKSANDR USYK**
Ukraine • 16-0-0 (12 KOs)

5 **GENNADY GOLOVKIN**
Kazakhstan • 38-1-1 (34 KOs)

6 **NAOYA INOUE**
Japan • 17-0-0 (15 KOs)

7 **MIKEY GARCIA**
U.S. • 39-0-0 (30 KOs)

8 **SRISAKET SOR RUNGVISAI**
Thailand • 47-4-1 (41 KOs)

9 **ERROL SPENCE JR.**
U.S. • 24-0-0 (21 KOs)

10 **DONNIE NIETES**
Philippines • 41-1-5 (23 KOs)

POUND FOR POUND: Aleksandr Usyk (No. 5 last month) ended all talk of the brash Tony Bellew "doing well" in the eighth round of their battle in Manchester, putting the Liverpudlian on his back with a perfect left hook. But Bellew *had* been doing well (ahead on the scorecards, in fact), and Usyk's patient, methodical performance was further testament to his brilliance – enough to lift him over Gennady Golovkin into the No. 4 spot.

HEAVYWEIGHTS: Longtime contender Kubrat Pulev made it back into the ratings at No. 10, partially on the merit of a unanimous decision over the "other" Fury, Hughie (unrated), and also because the inactive Dominic Breazeale (No. 8 last month) fell out.

CRUISERWEIGHTS: Yunier Dorticos rebounded from his final-seconds loss to Murat Gassiev in the WBSS with a unanimous decision over reliably challenging veteran Mateusz Masternak and moved from No. 4 to No. 3 as a result. Krzysztof Glowacki then advanced from No. 5 to No. 4 after knocking down and unanimously outpointing Maksim Vlasov, who fell from No. 6 to No. 7.

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS: No change.

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS: No change.

MIDDLEWEIGHTS: Rob Brant went from unlisted obscurity to No. 4 after upsetting Ryota Murata with a career-altering (for both, in opposite ways) unanimous decision. Japan's hopes for a middleweight star dropped off the chart along with Murata, who vacated the No. 6 spot. Demetrius Andrade expanded the definition of "wide decision" on the cards with four knockdowns but couldn't get the stoppage against late replacement Walter Kautondokwa (unrated); the undefeated Rhode Islander was promoted from No. 8 to No. 5. Hassan N'Dam (No. 9) was removed for inactivity, which left room for Poland's unbeaten Kamil Szeremeta at No. 10. Sergiy Derevyanchenko then lost a split decision against No. 2-rated Daniel Jacobs, but the Ukrainian boxer-puncher put up an admirable fight and only slipped from No. 6 to No. 7.

Daniel Jacobs earned the vacant IBF middleweight title with a hard-fought split decision over gym mate Sergiy Derevyanchenko.

JUNIOR MIDDLEWEIGHTS: No change.

WELTERWEIGHTS: No change.

JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHTS: It wasn't pretty, but Ivan Baranchyk overpowered Anthony Yigit (unrated) to get a seventh-round stoppage, after which the enthusiastic Russian climbed from No. 8 to No. 5.

LIGHTWEIGHTS: No change.

JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHTS: Tevin Farmer continued to impress and rose from No. 4 to No. 3 after a skillful, five-round dismantling of James Tennyson (unrated) to retain his title. Miguel Roman (No. 6 last month) got a beatdown from No. 1-rated Miguel Berchelt and was stopped in nine rounds, but the veteran of 73 fights made a good account of himself and only lost one spot in the ratings.

FEATHERWEIGHTS: No change.

JUNIOR FEATHERWEIGHTS: No change.

BANTAMWEIGHTS: Nonito Donaire's injury-driven stoppage of Ryan Burnett in the WBSS was an anticlimactic one and a bummer for Burnett, but it was a solid return to 118 for The Filipino Flash, who entered at No. 4 while Burnett slipped from No. 3 to No. 5. As for the man to be pushed out by Donaire's arrival, No. 7-rated Lee Haskins was chosen for his inactivity.

JUNIOR BANTAMWEIGHTS: No change.

FLYWEIGHTS: Francisco Rodriguez (No. 8 last month) has outgrown 112 and was thus removed, clearing No. 10 for another rising Japanese force in unbeaten 20-year-old Junto Nakatani.

JUNIOR FLYWEIGHTS: No change.

STRAWWEIGHTS: No change.

HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT UNLIMITED

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 ANTHONY JOSHUA** U.K. • 22-0-0 (21 KOs)
- **2 DEONTAY WILDER** U.S. • 40-0-0 (39 KOs)
- **3 LUIS ORTIZ** Cuba • 29-1-0 (25 KOs)
- **4 DILLIAN WHYTE** U.K. • 24-1-0 (17 KOs)
- **5 ALEXANDER POVETKIN** Russia • 34-2-0 (24 KOs)
- **6 JOSEPH PARKER** New Zealand • 24-2-0 (18 KOs)
- **7 TYSON FURY** U.K. • 27-0-0 (19 KOs)
- **8 ADAM KOWNACKI** U.S. • 18-0-0 (14 KOs)
- **9 JARRELL MILLER** U.S. • 22-0-1 (19 KOs)
- **10 KUBRAT PULEV** Bulgaria • 26-1-0 (13 KOs)

CRUISERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 200 LBS

- **C ALEKSANDR USYK** Ukraine • 16-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **1 MAIRIS BRIEDIS** Latvia • 25-1-0 (18 KOs)
- **2 MURAT GASSIEV** Russia • 26-1-0 (19 KOs)
- **3 YUNIER DORTICOS** Cuba • 23-1-0 (21 KOs)
- **4 KRZYSZTOF GLOWACKI** Poland • 31-1-0 (19 KOs)
- **5 DENIS LEBEDEV** Russia • 31-2-0 (23 KOs)
- **6 ANDREW TABITI** U.S. • 17-0-0 (13 KOs)
- **7 MAKSIM VLASOV** Russia • 42-3-0 (25 KOs)
- **8 KEVIN LERENA** S. Africa • 21-1-0 (9 KOs)
- **9 ILUNGA MAKABU** Congo • 23-2-0 (22 KOs)
- **10 CONSTANTIN BEJENARU** Moldova • 13-0-0 (3 KOs)

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 175 LBS

- **C (VACANT)**
- **1 ELEIDER ALVAREZ** Colombia • 24-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **2 DMITRY BIVOL** Russia • 14-0-0 (11 KOs)
- **3 ADONIS STEVENSON** Canada • 29-1-1 (24 KOs)
- **4 BADOU JACK** Sweden • 22-1-3 (13 KOs)
- **5 SERGEY KOVALEV** Russia • 32-3-1 (28 KOs)
- **6 OLEKSANDR GVOZDYK** Ukraine • 15-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **7 ARTUR BETERBIEV** Russia • 13-0-0 (13 KOs)
- **8 SULLIVAN BARRERA** Cuba • 22-2-0 (14 KOs)
- **9 MARCUS BROWNE** U.S. • 22-0-0 (16 KOs)
- **10 JOE SMITH JR.** U.S. • 24-2-0 (20 KOs)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 LBS

- **C CALLUM SMITH** U.K. • 25-0-0 (18 KOs)
- **1 GILBERTO RAMIREZ** Mexico • 38-0-0 (25 KOs)
- **2 DAVID BENAVIDEZ** U.S. • 20-0-0 (17 KOs)
- **3 JOSE UZCATEGUI** Venezuela • 28-2-0 (23 KOs)
- **4 GEORGE GROVES** U.K. • 28-4-0 (20 KOs)
- **5 JAMES DEGALE** U.K. • 25-2-1 (15 KOs)
- **6 ANTHONY DIRRELL** U.S. • 32-1-1 (24 KOs)
- **7 CHRIS EUBANK JR.** U.K. • 27-2-0 (21 KOs)
- **8 CALEB TRUAX** U.S. • 30-4-2 (19 KOs)
- **9 ROCKY FIELDING** U.K. • 27-1-0 (15 KOs)
- **10 JESSE HART** U.S. • 25-1-0 (21 KOs)

RATINGS

Through fights of Nov. 11, 2018

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 LBS

C **CANELO ALVAREZ**
Mexico • 50-1-2 (34 KOs)

1 **GENNADY GOLOVKIN**
Kaz. • 38-1-1 (34 KOs)

2 **DANIEL JACOBS**
U.S. • 35-2-0 (29 KOs)

3 **BILLY JOE SAUNDERS**
U.K. • 26-0-0 (12 KOs)

4 **ROB BRANT**
U.S. • 24-1-0 (16 KOs)

5 **DEMETRIUS ANDRADE**
U.S. • 26-0-0 (16 KOs)

6 **JERMALL CHARLO**
U.S. • 27-0-0 (21 KOs)

7 **SERGIY DEREVYANCHENKO**
Ukraine • 12-1-0 (10 KOs)

8 **DAVID LEMIEUX**
Canada • 40-4-0 (34 KOs)

9 **MACIEJ SULECKI**
Poland • 27-1-0 (11 KOs)

10 **KAMIL SZEREMETA**
Poland • 18-0-0 (4 KOs)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 LBS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **JARRETT HURD**
U.S. • 22-0-0 (15 KOs)

2 **JERMELL CHARLO**
U.S. • 31-0-0 (15 KOs)

3 **ERISLANDY LARA**
Cuba • 25-3-2 (14 KOs)

4 **JAIME MUNGUIA**
Mexico • 31-0-0 (26 KOs)

5 **BRIAN CASTANO**
Argentina • 15-0-0 (11 KOs)

6 **MICHEL SORO**
France • 32-2-1 (21 KOs)

7 **JULIAN WILLIAMS**
U.S. • 25-1-1 (15 KOs)

8 **KELL BROOK**
U.K. • 37-2-0 (26 KOs)

9 **AUSTIN TROUT**
U.S. • 31-5-0 (17 KOs)

10 **LIAM SMITH**
U.K. • 26-2-1 (14 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 LBS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **ERROL SPENCE**
U.S. • 24-0-0 (21 KOs)

2 **TERENCE CRAWFORD**
U.S. • 34-0-0 (25 KOs)

3 **KEITH THURMAN**
U.S. • 28-0-0 (22 KOs)

4 **SHAWN PORTER**
U.S. • 29-2-1 (17 KOs)

5 **MANNY PACQUIAO**
Phil. • 60-7-2 (39 KOs)

6 **DANNY GARCIA**
U.S. • 34-2-0 (20 KOs)

7 **EGIDIJUS KAVALIAUSKAS**
Lithuania • 20-0-0 (16 KOs)

8 **YORDENIS UGAS**
Cuba • 23-3-0 (11 KOs)

9 **JEFF HORN**
Australia • 18-1-1 (12 KOs)

10 **JESSIE VARGAS**
U.S. • 28-2-2 (10 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 LBS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **REGIS PROGRAIS**
U.S. • 23-0-0 (19 KOs)

2 **JOSH TAYLOR**
U.K. • 14-0-0 (12 KOs)

3 **JOSE RAMIREZ**
U.S. • 23-0-0 (16 KOs)

4 **KIRYL RELIKH**
Belarus • 23-2-0 (19 KOs)

5 **IVAN BARANCHYK**
Russia • 19-0-0 (12 KOs)

6 **VIKTOR POSTOL**
Ukraine • 30-2-0 (12 KOs)

7 **MAURICE HOOKER**
U.S. • 24-0-3 (16 KOs)

8 **SERGEY LIPINETS**
Russia • 14-1-0 (10 KOs)

9 **EDUARD TROYANOVSKY**
Russia • 27-2-0 (24 KOs)

10 **ANTONIO OROZCO**
U.S. • 27-1-0 (17 KOs)

Derevyanchenko lost his first pro bout against Jacobs but remains a top-10 middleweight contender.

Anthony Yigit (left) showed solid boxing craft but was overwhelmed by Ivan Baranchyk's aggressive style.

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 LBS

C **VASILIY LOMACHENKO**
Ukraine • 11-1-0 (9 KOs)

1 **MIKEY GARCIA**
U.S. • 39-0-0 (30 KOs)

2 **ROBERT EASTER**
U.S. • 21-1-0 (14 KOs)

3 **JOSE PEDRAZA**
P.R. • 25-1-0 (12 KOs)

4 **RICHARD COMMEY**
Ghana • 27-2-0 (24 KOs)

5 **ANTHONY CROLLA**
U.K. • 34-6-3 (13 KOs)

6 **LUKE CAMPBELL**
U.K. • 19-2-0 (15 KOs)

7 **RAYMUNDO BELTRAN**
Mexico • 35-8-1 (21 KOs)

8 **DEVIN HANEY**
U.S. • 20-0-0 (13 KOs)

8 **EMMANUEL TAGOE**
Ghana • 29-1-0 (14 KOs)

10 **FRANCESCO PATERA**
Belgium • 20-3-0 (7 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 LBS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **MIGUEL BERCHELT**
Mexico • 35-1-0 (31 KOs)

2 **GERVONTA DAVIS**
U.S. • 20-0-0 (19 KOs)

3 **TEVIN FARMER**
U.S. • 27-4-1 (6 KOs)

4 **ALBERTO MACHADO**
P.R. • 21-0-0 (17 KOs)

5 **FRANCISCO VARGAS**
Mexico • 25-1-2 (18 KOs)

6 **MASAYUKI ITO**
Japan • 24-1-1 (12 KOs)

7 **MIGUEL ROMAN**
Mexico • 60-13-0 (47 KOs)

8 **JEZREEL CORRALES**
Panama • 22-2-0 (8 KOs)

9 **EDUARDO HERNANDEZ**
Mexico • 27-0-0 (24 KOs)

10 **SHAVKATDZHON RAKHIMOV**
Russia • 13-0-0 (10 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 LBS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **LEO SANTA CRUZ**
U.S. • 35-1-1 (19 KOs)

2 **GARY RUSSELL JR.**
U.S. • 29-1-0 (17 KOs)

3 **CARL FRAMPTON**
U.K. • 26-1-0 (15 KOs)

4 **OSCAR VALDEZ**
Mexico • 24-0-0 (19 KOs)

5 **ABNER MARES**
Mexico • 31-3-1 (15 KOs)

6 **JOSH WARRINGTON**
U.K. • 27-0-0 (6 KOs)

7 **JOSEPH DIAZ JR.**
U.S. • 27-1-0 (14 KOs)

8 **LEE SELBY**
U.K. • 26-2-0 (9 KOs)

9 **SCOTT QUIGG**
U.K. • 35-2-2 (26 KOs)

10 **JESUS ROJAS**
P.R. • 26-2-2 (19 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 LBS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **ISAAC DOGBOE**
Ghana • 20-0-0 (14 KOs)

2 **GUILLERMO RIGONDEAUX**
Cuba • 17-1-0 (11 KOs)

3 **REY VARGAS**
Mexico • 32-0-0 (22 KOs)

4 **DANIEL ROMAN**
U.S. • 26-2-1 (10 KOs)

5 **JESSIE MAGDALENO**
U.S. • 25-1-0 (18 KOs)

6 **DIEGO DE LA HOYA**
Mexico • 21-0-0 (10 KOs)

7 **TJ DOHENY**
Australia • 20-0-0 (14 KOs)

8 **TOMOKI KAMEDA**
Japan • 36-2-0 (20 KOs)

9 **EMANUEL NAVARRETE**
Mexico • 25-1-0 (22 KOs)

10 **RYOSUKE IWASA**
Japan • 25-3-0 (16 KOs)

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RATINGS

Through fights of Nov. 11, 2018

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 LBS

C (VACANT)

1 NAOYA INOUE
Japan • 17-0-0 (15 KOs)

2 ZOLANI TETE
S. Africa • 28-3-0 (21 KOs)

3 EMMANUEL RODRIGUEZ
P.R. • 19-0-0 (12 KOs)

4 NONITO DONAIRE
Philippines • 39-5-0 (25 KOs)

5 RYAN BURNETT
U.K. • 19-1-0 (9 KOs)

6 LUIS NERY
Mexico • 27-0-0 (21 KOs)

7 LIBORIO SOLIS
Venezuela • 27-5-1 (12 KOs)

8 JASON MOLONEY
Australia • 17-1-0 (14 KOs)

9 NORDINE OUBAALI
France • 14-0-0 (11 KOs)

10 TAKUMA INOUE
Japan • 12-0-0 (3 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 LBS

C SRISAKET SOR RUNGVISAI
Thailand • 47-4-1 (41 KOs)

1 JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA
Mexico • 37-3-0 (25 KOs)

2 KHALID YAFAI
U.K. • 24-0-0 (15 KOs)

3 KAZUTO IOKA
Japan • 23-1-0 (13 KOs)

4 JERWIN ANCAJAS
Phil. • 30-1-2 (20 KOs)

5 ROMAN GONZALEZ
Nicaragua • 47-2-0 (39 KOs)

6 ANDREW MOLONEY
Australia • 18-0-0 (11 KOs)

7 DONNIE NIETES
Philippines • 41-1-5 (23 KOs)

8 RAU'SHEE WARREN
U.S. • 16-2-0 (4 KOs)

9 ASTON PALICTE
Philippines • 24-2-1 (20 KOs)

10 MCWILLIAMS ARROYO
P.R. • 17-4-0 (14 KOs)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 LBS

C (VACANT)

1 MORUTI MTHALANE
S. Africa • 36-2-0 (24 KOs)

2 KOSEI TANAKA
Japan • 12-0-0 (7 KOs)

3 ARTEM DALAKIAN
Ukraine • 17-0-0 (12 KOs)

4 ANDREW SELBY
U.K. • 11-0-0 (6 KOs)

5 CRISTOFER ROSALES
Nicaragua • 28-3-0 (19 KOs)

6 SHO KIMURA
Japan • 17-2-2 (10 KOs)

7 MASAYUKI KURODA
Japan • 30-7-3 (16 KOs)

8 VINCENT LEGRAND
France • 28-0-0 (17 KOs)

9 WENFENG GE
China • 11-0-0 (6 KOs)

10 JUNTO NAKATANI
Japan • 17-0-0 (12 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 LBS

C HEKKIE BUDLER
S. Africa • 32-3-0 (10 KOs)

1 KEN SHIRO
Japan • 14-0-0 (8 KOs)

2 RYOICHI TAGUCHI
Japan • 27-3-2 (12 KOs)

3 CARLOS CANIZALES
Venezuela • 21-0-1 (17 KOs)

4 ANGEL ACOSTA
P.R. • 19-1-0 (19 KOs)

5 FELIX ALVARADO
Nicaragua • 34-2-0 (30 KOs)

6 GANIGAN LOPEZ
Mexico • 34-8-0 (19 KOs)

7 HIROTO KYOGUCHI
Japan • 11-0-0 (8 KOs)

8 REY LORETO
Phil. • 24-14-0 (16 KOs)

9 MILAN MELINDO
Phil. • 37-4-0 (13 KOs)

10 EDWARD HENO
Phil. • 13-0-5 (5 KOs)

Don't let Tevin Farmer's "Rainbow Bright"-style trunks fool you; he's a top junior lightweight and doesn't play around, as James Tennyson learned.

The storied career of Nonito Donaire (right) will continue due, in part, to a freak back injury suffered by WBSS opponent Ryan Burnett.

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 LBS

C (VACANT)

1 WANHENG MENAYOTHIN
Thailand • 51-0-0 (18 KOs)

2 KNOCKOUT CP FRESHMART
Thailand • 18-0-0 (7 KOs)

3 BYRON ROJAS
Nicaragua • 25-3-3 (11 KOs)

4 VIC SALUDAR
Philippines • 18-3-0 (10 KOs)

5 SIMPHIWE KHONCO
S. Africa • 19-5-0 (7 KOs)

6 JOSE ARGUMEDO
Mexico • 22-4-1 (13 KOs)

7 TSUBASA KOURA
Japan • 14-0-0 (9 KOs)

8 TATSUYA FUKUHARA
Japan • 21-6-6 (7 KOs)

9 DEEJAY KRIEL
S. Africa • 14-1-1 (6 KOs)

10 MARK ANTHONY BARRIGA
Philippines • 9-0-0 (1 KO)

HOW OUR RATINGS ARE COMPILED
RECORDS PROVIDED BY BOXREC.COM

Championship vacancies can be filled in the following two ways: 1. The Ring's Nos. 1 and 2 contenders fight one another. 2. If the Nos. 1 and 2 contenders choose not to fight one another and No. 1 fights No. 3, that matchup could be for the Ring title if the Editorial Board deems No. 3 worthy.

A champion can lose his belt in six situations: 1. The Champion loses a fight in the weight class in which he is champion; 2. The Champion moves to another weight class; 3. The Champion does not schedule a fight in any weight class for 18 months, although injuries and certain other unforeseen circumstances could be taken into consideration; 4. The Champion does not schedule a fight at his championship weight for 18 months (even if he fights at another weight); 5. The Champion does not schedule a fight with a Top-5 contender from any weight class for two years; 6. The Champion retires.

The Ring Editorial Board considers input from the Ratings Panel of boxing journalists from around the world and then decides collectively what changes will be made. That applies to both the pound-for-pound and divisional ratings.

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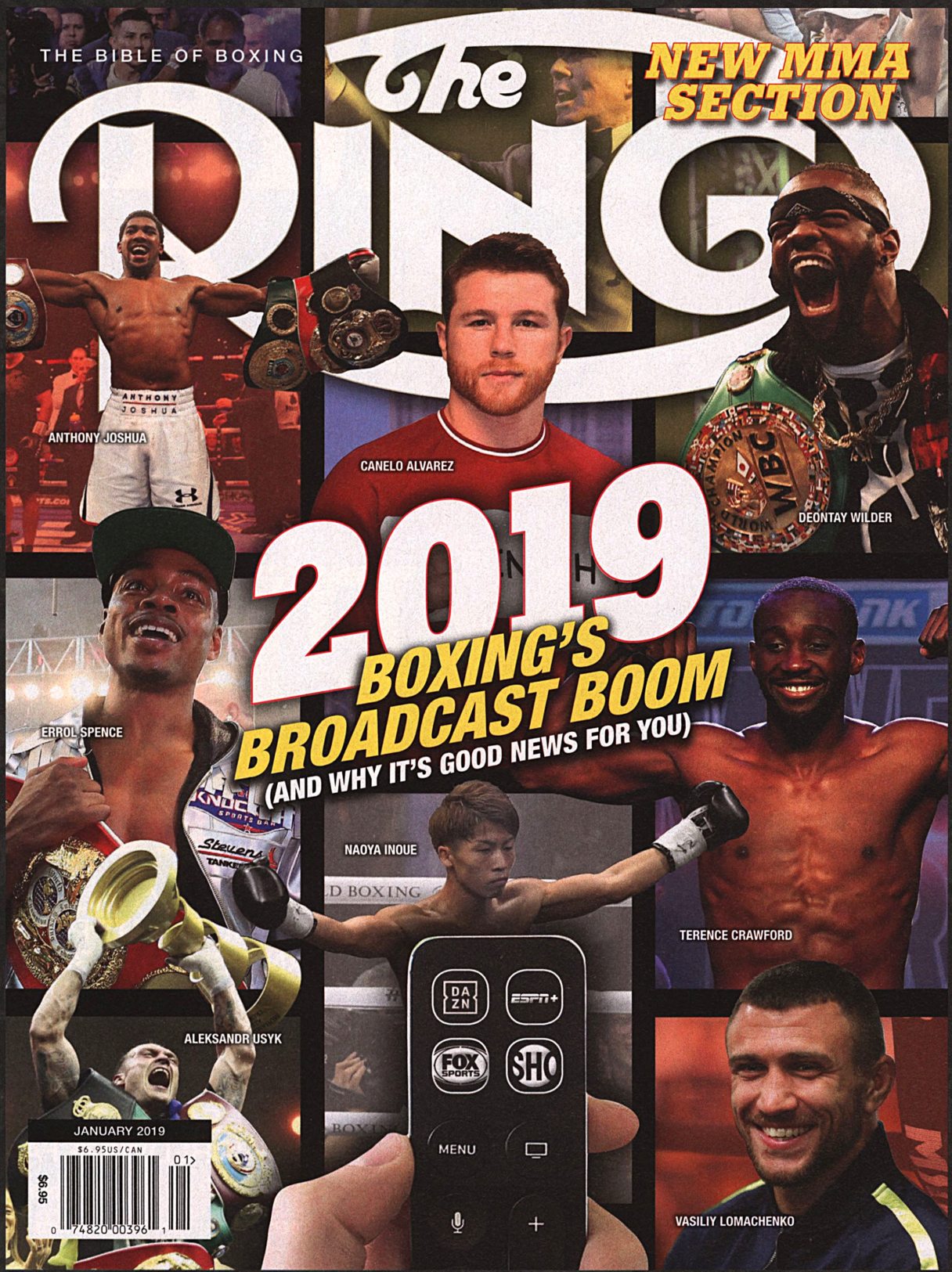

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MAN ON FIRE

FUELED BY CRUSHING KNOCKOUT POWER AND SUPERB BOXING SKILLS, JAPANESE STAR NAOYA INOUE'S BLAZING ASCENT TO ELITE STATUS IS CREATING TALK OF WORLDWIDE FAME

By **Tom Gray**

Interview translation by **Masa Ueda**

PHOTO BY NAOKI FUKUDA

One-two.

The jab-cross is a combination that you learn very early in any worthwhile gym in the world. It's Boxing 101. It's a maneuver the average person off the street could mimic effortlessly. However, there are one-twos and there are *one-twos*, and the power-packed two-piece that struck Juan Carlos Payano on October 7 at Yokohama Arena was the latter.

With just under a minute gone in round one, Japanese sensation Naoya Inoue landed flush on the hard-nosed former bantamweight titleholder. No gimmicks. Nothing complicated. Just two basic punches and Payano, who had lost just once in 21 professional fights (via majority decision to Rau'shee Warren) was switched off like a porch light. The official time was 1:10.

How's that for a mic drop?

Inoue (17-0, 15 knockouts) is accustomed to making a big impression. In April 2014, four days prior to his 20th birthday, he stopped Adrian Hernandez in six rounds to win the WBC junior flyweight title. Nine months later, the explosive boxer-puncher jumped up to junior bantamweight and wrenched the WBO belt from long-reigning Omar Narvaez via second-round knockout. And British veteran Jamie McDonnell, unbeaten in 10 years, was relieved of his WBA "regular" bantamweight belt in May, when he also succumbed to a

The bigger they are, the harder they fall against Naoya Inoue, as 5-foot-10 bantamweight contender Jamie McDonnell learned. It only took Inoue 112 seconds to administer the lesson to the British veteran.

shuddering first-round stoppage.

Crushing performances are habitual, but why was Payano so easy?

"It's difficult to say if Payano made a mistake or not, because it was such a short fight," said Inoue when asked by The Ring what weakness he had detected. "When I stepped in, I knew the punch was going to land, and I knew I was going to get the knockout. In a big match, when everyone's watching, I feel it's better for me to knock someone out as early as possible."

Once everyone got their breath back, nobody was complaining. We already knew that Inoue was an authentic knockout-puncher who had carried his power up to bantamweight. We got that memo when "The Monster" feasted on McDonnell, who had never been stopped in 32 prior outings. However, the Payano obliteration, in what was Inoue's World Boxing Super Series debut, sent serious shockwaves through the sport.

"I rank Inoue as the number-one fighter, pound for pound, in the world today," opined Los Angeles trainer Rudy Hernandez, who was introduced to the Japanese boxing scene in the 1980s through his brother, late 130-pound champ Genaro Hernandez, whose manager was from Japan. "This kid was special from the get-go. He has everything, and he's still growing and maturing. He's just phenomenal, and we haven't seen the best of him yet.

"Sometimes you get fighters that, no matter who trains them, no matter who they're with, are born to be special. Guys like Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Robinson, Sugar Ray Leonard and Roy Jones Jr. were meant to be great. They were the chosen ones, right? Inoue is one of them."

So is Inoue a gift from the boxing gods? Maybe, but he was also chosen by his father. Shingo Inoue competed very briefly as an amateur boxer but couldn't pursue the sport with zeal due to other commitments. However, his passion for boxing was undeniable and, as it turned out, contagious for his sons – both Naoya and younger brother Takuma, an unbeaten bantamweight contender – and they set out to forge their own paths in the sweet science.

"My father taught me the fundamentals, especially the defense," said Inoue, who is rated No. 1 by The Ring at 118 pounds. "That's the base of my boxing. If it wasn't for my father, I wouldn't have taken up the sport. He's basically what boxing is to me and I feel his influence. All of my success comes from my father.

"It's not a natural thing. I've been training since I was 6 years old. I don't work on power in the gym – there's no special training for that – I just practice. I work hard to develop my skills, my technique and my overall ability. One of my greatest assets is actually my timing."

"In order to have timing, you need to see everything coming at you," offered Hernandez, who has worked with dozens of Japanese standouts over the decades and currently coaches WBO junior lightweight beltholder Masayuki Ito. "Every fighter makes a certain move before they punch, and Inoue catches on to an opponent's timing right away. Also, he's not a fighter who gets hit very often because, like Floyd Mayweather, he's able to read an opponent.

"He's just the full package. It's hard to criticize a fighter who has had nothing but success. He always knows where he needs to be inside that ring, and he knows the distance he needs to have. Eventually he just breaks his opponents down and knocks them out."

So can Inoue maintain this momentum and cross over to become a global attraction? The two most popular sports in Japan, by far, are soccer and baseball, so fan affection at home hasn't been quite as big as one might expect. It has therefore been difficult for that fearsome reputation to resonate any further.

Also, until very recently, Ryota Murata was the fighting man of the moment in Japan. Why? Because he was a (WBA regular) middleweight titleholder and an Olympic gold medalist. Timing, however, is everything, and Murata's recent points defeat to Rob Brant juxtaposed alongside Inoue's stunning WBSS entry could prompt a natural changing of the guard.

"Inoue's exposure has grown since he joined (show business company) Hori Productions," said boxing writer Yuriko Miyata, who has covered the Japanese scene for more than 20 years. "He appears on variety shows on TV, and an autobiography has been published.

"He can be the first Japanese fighter to be recognized as great worldwide. Of course, in this era, technology helps a lot. Some old Japanese fighters could have been recognized if they were here now. Usually Japanese world champions fight at home, but I believe that a world champion has to fight anybody, anywhere to prove he is strongest. Inoue can be the one to do that."

In May 1998, an undistinguished flyweight named Manny Pacquiao made the 2,000-mile trip from the Philippines to Japan for a 10-round bout against Shin Terao at Korakuen Hall. Pacquiao, a home-run hitter at the lower weights, floored his man three times and knocked him out in a single round. Miyata covered that show from ringside and "never could have imagined" that Pacquiao would go on to become a global star.

"Manny Pacquiao had a different kind of charisma," said Hernandez. "He was Filipino, and different countries produce different personalities. Inoue doesn't say a whole lot, because he doesn't have to. He just goes in there, finishes fighters off and makes it look simple. That's the path he's on.

"With Pacquiao, he had the speed, the jumping around, the smile. He had a little more going for him in the promotional sense. Also, if you can speak English (Inoue does not) that helps to promote you. But then again, Roberto Duran didn't speak English. I understand in today's era that you have to get yourself out there, but that's not Inoue. He just fights, wins and shows respect."

Inoue admitted that he craves the

Japan's boxing scene is on an upswing, and Inoue is clearly its finest boxer.

type of superstardom that Pacquiao enjoyed, but for now it's all about taking care of business in the ring. In early 2019, he will face unbeaten IBF bantamweight titleholder Emmanuel Rodriguez, who outpointed Jason Moloney in Orlando, Florida, on October 20. Should Inoue prevail, he would meet either Zolani Tete or Nonito Donaire in the tournament final.

"From looking at the Moloney fight, I could see that Rodriguez had speed, technique and very good fundamentals," said Inoue, who was ringside. "I think it's going to be a good fight, and we'll both try to match each other's skills. I can see this fight being at close distance and very skillful.

"This tournament allows us to find out who really is top of the division. The main reason I entered is because I wanted to prove I was number one. It would have been hard to become undisputed champion without the World Boxing Super Series. Right now, I am motivated to show my skills, my speed and my power all over the world, not just in Japan."

If he wins the inaugural WBSS bantamweight tournament, Inoue will emerge as IBF, WBA, WBO and, most likely, Ring Magazine champion at 118 pounds. And despite the terrific fighters that he will have to overcome to lay claim to the prestigious Muhammad Ali trophy, Inoue will be a prohibitive favorite to do just that.

"All of them are in trouble," laughed Hernandez when he considered the plight of the tournament's other competitors. "As I told you, I rank Inoue as the number one pound-for-pound fighter in the world. Based on his abilities and what he's shown, there's not a bantamweight out there that can beat him."

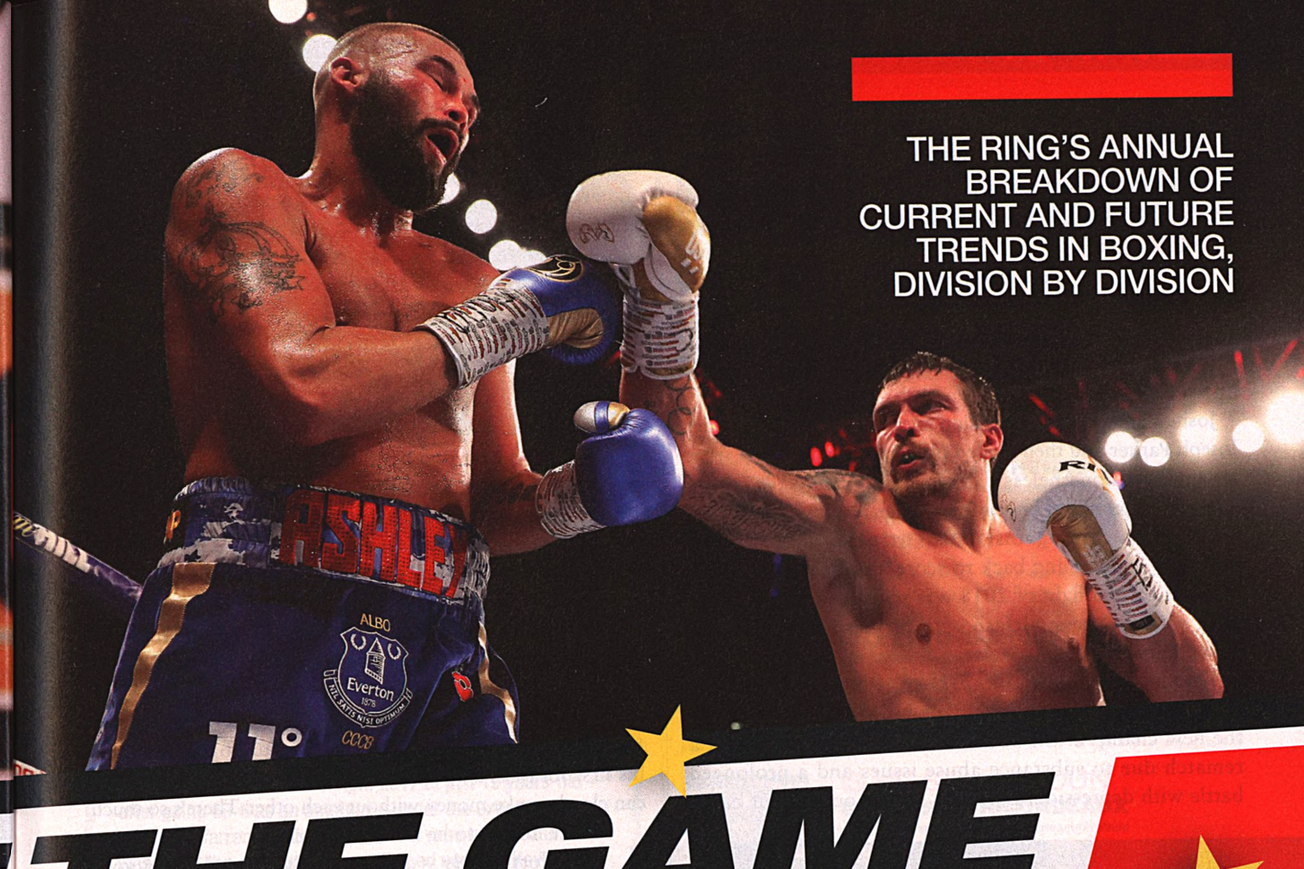
Hernandez, a former pro boxer who isn't easily impressed by this era's fighters, is obviously sold on Inoue, and he has been for some time. The boxing media have gotten the picture in a big way – hence this month's cover star – and fight fans are clamoring to see "The Monster" unleashed as soon as possible. Yes, the excitement is definitely building for Naoya Inoue, who continues to take his chilling reputation to new heights.

He might never become a Manny Pacquiao – there will never be another Pacquiao – but this is a new kind of star with his own unique style and one very unique mission.

"I'm 25 years old right now, and I'm very happy that I'm leading the way in the Japanese boxing scene," said Inoue, who enjoys spending time with his infant son and singing karaoke when he isn't producing bone-crunching knockouts.

"I plan to make the sport even bigger in my country, and that is a big motivation for me. The sport is gradually getting bigger in Japan, but there's more to be done. I would be very happy if little kids took up boxing because they look up to me as a role model." RING

Tom Gray is Associate Editor for Ring Magazine. Follow him on Twitter: @Tom_Gray_Boxing.



THE RING'S ANNUAL BREAKDOWN OF CURRENT AND FUTURE TRENDS IN BOXING, DIVISION BY DIVISION

STATE OF THE GAME

Written by David Greisman / Compiled by Greisman, Martin Mulcahey and Anson Wainwright

Note: State of the Game was compiled through fights of Nov. 16, 2018. »

The coronation of Ring champs Aleksandr Usyk (upper right) and Callum Smith (lower left) via the World Boxing Super Series were among boxing's high points in 2018. Marquee matchups such as Errol Spence vs. Mikey Garcia (upper left) and Manny Pacquiao vs. Adrien Broner (lower right) could highlight 2019.

TOP TWO: REUTERS; BOTTOM: AP/ERIK VERDUZCO

The general rule is that boxing thrives when the best face the best and suffers when they don't. By that logic, the heavyweight division should be in much worse shape than it is. Anthony Joshua and Deontay Wilder, who hold all the major world titles between them, have been unable to make a deal. That's disappointing, but it hasn't been devastating.

It's hard to complain about the fights we've gotten instead.

Joshua unified with a decision over undefeated titleholder Joseph Parker and then fended off a capable challenge from an aged yet nonetheless dangerous Alexander Povetkin, winning by technical knockout. Wilder, meanwhile, showed heart and a chin against Luis Ortiz, battling through adversity and coming back to score a dramatic stoppage. Wilder's second fight of 2018 was scheduled for after The Ring went to press: a clash with former Ring champion Tyson Fury.

This division should've been a mess after Fury disappeared. He'd outboxed Wladimir Klitschko to become the new champ at the end of 2015, then pulled out of a rematch due to substance abuse issues and a prolonged battle with depression. Everyone moved on without him – Klitschko ended up passing the torch to Joshua – and the arguments over whether Fury remained the lineal champ didn't matter. His belts found new owners, and there were enough competent contenders vying for the top position.

What we're experiencing is a de facto tournament. A division that was painfully shallow at times when the Klitschko brothers reigned is deeper now. There are interesting and important fights to be made, each producing a potential challenger to the throne.

Fury returned this past summer and didn't do much of anything to earn the fight with Wilder besides drop a lot of weight and beat two opponents. Still, Fury's status – he is the returning yet uncrowned king – means his fight with Wilder merits attention, particularly as talk afterward will turn to whether the winner can make a deal with Joshua for perhaps the biggest fight that can be made in the sport right now.

Joshua is the true superstar of the division, drawing huge crowds at soccer stadiums in the United Kingdom. He's also one of the signature fighters on streaming network DAZN. Wilder, meanwhile, has been featured on networks aligned with Premier Boxing Champions; the Fury fight was to be his first foray as a Showtime pay-per-view headliner. They can clearly make money without each other. There's so much more money to be made together.

Unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on your perspective – there are backup options for both.

Joshua could move on to meet Jarrell Miller, the "Big Baby" who is in much better shape than his 300-pound weigh-ins would otherwise indicate. There's also Dillian Whyte, who fell short in a thriller with Joshua in 2015 but has won eight straight since, including a decision over Parker. He will have a rematch of his war with Dereck Chisora first and, should he come out unscathed enough, aim for a sequel with Joshua.

If Wilder beats Fury, he could bide his time against lesser opponents like Dominic Breazeale, who lost to Joshua in 2016. We'd rather see a fan-friendly battle between Breazeale and Adam Kownacki. Povetkin deserves another shot. Ortiz and Parker are also each trying to bounce back. Kubrat Pulev has won six in a row since Klitschko defeated him in 2014. Bryant Jennings continues to rebuild from back-to-back losses to Klitschko and Ortiz.

And then there's Aleksandr Usyk, the best 200-pounder in the world. Usyk turned back a spirited challenge from Tony Bellew, scoring a sensational eighth-round KO in November, and it's reasonable to wonder whether he'll follow the path blazed by history's great cruiserweights and move up to heavyweight soon. ★

Titleholders Anthony Joshua and Deontay Wilder did not fight in 2018, but the year was still a pretty good one for the heavyweight division.

JOSHUA: NICK POTTS; WILDER: ANTHONY GEATHERS

NEW BLOOD
BY ANSON WAINWRIGHT

Our State of the Game is full of recognizable names, but there are a slew of blue-chip prospects (presented here in alphabetical order) from all four corners of the globe hungry to make their mark. As always, some will shine, some will settle in as gatekeepers and others will crash and burn spectacularly over the coming years. But as of now, all are hoping to one day rule their respective divisions.

HEAVYWEIGHT:

EFE AJAGBA (Nigeria) 7-0 (6 KOs)

The 24-year-old Ajagba is based in Houston, Texas, where he trains with Ronnie Shields. He's promoted by Ringstar and gained notoriety in August when opponent Curtis Harper walked out of the ring immediately after the opening bell sounded.

DANIEL DUBOIS (U.K.) 9-0 (8 KOs)

He turned professional in April 2017 at just 19 years-old – after going 69-6 as an amateur – under the expert guidance of Frank Warren. He demolished everyone he faced until he was taken the distance by experienced survivor Kevin Johnson last time out, which will serve the 21-year-old puncher well as he progresses.

FILIP HRGOVIC (CROATIA) 6-0 (5 KOs)

The 6-foot-6, 230-pound Olympic bronze medalist is every bit the modern-day heavyweight. His skills are impressive, his power is fight-altering, he's aligned with European powerhouse promoter Sauerland Event and is guided by renowned Cuban trainer Pedro Diaz.

JOE JOYCE (U.K.) 6-0 (6 KOs)

The physically imposing Joyce is more mature than many of his counterparts at 33 and is moving quickly, winning the Commonwealth title in his fourth outing. Promoted by David Haye and Ringstar, the Olympic silver medalist recently came to train in America with Abel Sanchez and is aligned with Al Haymon.

TONY YOKA (FRANCE) 5-0 (4 KOs)

Yoka is supremely gifted, with a 2015 world championship and 2016 Olympic super heavyweight gold medal to prove it. But there's a caveat. The 26-year-old is currently serving a one-year ban in France for a doping test no-show. He is still able to fight abroad, however, and has signed with Los Angeles-based Ringstar.

KEEP AN EYE ON: IVAN DYCHKO, BAKHODIR JALOLOV, SERGEY KUZMIN AND EVGENY TISCHENKO.

BOXING'S BEST
The Ring editors' pound-for-pound list

BEST PUNCHER
NAOYA INOUE

(RUNNERS-UP: DEONTAY WILDER, ADONIS STEVENSON)

BEST BOXER
VASILIY LOMACHENKO

(RUNNERS-UP: TERENCE CRAWFORD, ALEKSANDR USYK)

MOST PROTECTED
GILBERTO RAMIREZ

(RUNNERS-UP: JAIME MUNGUIA, JERMALL CHARLO)

IS HE STILL AROUND?
GUILLERMO RIGONDEAUX

(RUNNERS-UP: HASSAN N'DAM, AUSTIN TROUT)

MATCHMAKER'S DREAM
JOSHUA VS. WILDER/FURY WINNER

(RUNNERS-UP: CRAWFORD VS. SPENCE, LOMACHENKO VS. MIKEY GARCIA)

DESERVES A TITLE SHOT
BADOU JACK

(RUNNERS-UP: ANDREW SELBY, DIEGO DE LA HOYA)

MOST FUN TO WATCH
NAOYA INOUE

(RUNNERS-UP: ISAAC DOGBOE, ERROL SPENCE)

ON THE WAY UP
KOSEI TANAKA

(RUNNERS-UP: TEVIN FARMER, CRISTOFER ROSALES)

ON THE WAY DOWN
SERGEY KOVALEV

(RUNNERS-UP: RAYMUNDO BELTRAN, RYOTA MURATA)

Usyk emerged as the undisputed king of the cruiserweight division, but the Ukrainian southpaw may soon make his heavyweight debut.

The first World Boxing Super Series cruiserweight tournament hadn't even been over for three months when the next one began. And it's not like it was necessary – the first one crowned Aleksandr Usyk as the undisputed champ, with all four world titles and the Ring belt. He'd beaten Marco Huck, Mairis Briedis and Murat Gassiev to get there. The winner of any second tournament would just be second fiddle.

Except Usyk might not stick around 200 much longer, following the path cruisers have taken for years by heading up to heavyweight for the possibility of bigger challenges, bigger paydays and enhanced legacies.

You can't blame Usyk for being tempted, especially since there's nothing left for him to prove here. He's already beaten two of the new tournament's semifinalists (Briedis and Krzysztof Glowacki), and he beat Gassiev, who beat another current semifinalist, Yunier Dorticos. His latest victory may well be his last hurrah, a TKO of Tony Bellew, another cruiser who tested the heavyweight waters with some success.

Don't expect Usyk to be intimidated. This is the same highly confident, highly skilled fighter who won his last four bouts in hostile territory.

So the WBSS winner won't be second fiddle, but rather the frontrunner in a post-Usyk division. And if the sanctioning bodies are wise (ha!), they will disperse their titles among the remaining fights.

If the frontrunner is going to be Briedis, who once gave Usyk a tough fight, then he'll need to perform better after a match he should've lost to Noel Gevor. He somehow got that decision and will now face Glowacki, who outpointed Maxim Vlasov (who had won 12 straight since moving up amazingly all the way from super middleweight following a loss to Gilberto Ramirez in 2015).

Dorticos, who was stopped by Gassiev in the final seconds of their thrilling fight, outpointed Mateusz Masternak. He'll move on to meet Andrew Tabiti, the division's rare American of note and the only remaining undefeated fighter in the tournament. Tabiti won on the scorecards in hostile territory, giving Ruslan Fayfer his first loss.

Gassiev, by the way, hasn't fought since Usyk due to an injury. Whoever wins the WBSS this time should still need to go through him for complete bragging rights.

Denis Lebedev hasn't been involved in either of the tournaments, is 39 and fights less often these days. He should still be considered a factor based on his very competitive split-decision loss to Gassiev at the end of 2016. ★

NEW BLOOD: CRUISERWEIGHT

ALEXEY EGOROV (RUSSIA)
6-0 (5 KOs)

A solid amateur who regularly figured in the Russian national championships before turning professional in the fall of 2016, the 27-year-old stopped onetime contender Lateef Kayode in six rounds to legitimize his position.

LAWRENCE OKOLIE (U.K.)
10-0 (7 KOs)

The lanky 25-year-old represented Great Britain at the 2016 Olympics and has already won British and Commonwealth titles in the pro ranks. "The Sauce" is promoted by Matchroom and managed by Anthony Joshua.

ALEKSEI PAPIN (RUSSIA)
10-0 (9 KOs)

Papin is a heavy-handed former kickboxer who has seamlessly moved into the professional ranks, hammering his way through ex-contenders turned journeymen. At 31, he figures to move quickly.

KEEP AND EYE ON: EFETOBOR APOCHI, JAI OPETAIA AND TERVEL PULEV.

Andre Ward's retirement has left no clear leader at the top of 175.

If it's anyone by default, it's lineal champ Adonis Stevenson. But his level of opposition was so weak for years that The Ring took the rare step of stripping him of its title. Stevenson and Badou Jack fought to a draw in May, with Jack giving the first half away and then coming on strong in the second. Stevenson was able to gut it out, and he's set for another good test in early December against Oleksandr Gvozdyk.

The leader certainly isn't Sergey Kovalev anymore, and not just because of his two losses to Andre Ward. While Kovalev briefly rebounded and won one of Ward's vacant titles, he suffered a devastating knockout to Eleider Alvarez in August. It was a big win for Alvarez, who'd been the mandatory challenger for Stevenson for more than two years. The fight had been competitive before it ended abruptly, and Kovalev does have a rematch clause, so they'll meet again in early 2019.

A changing of the guard may be underway.

Light heavyweight is no longer the domain of two or three notable names. In addition to Alvarez, Gvozdyk, Jack, Kovalev and Stevenson, there's also Artur Beterbiev, Dmitry Bivol and Marcus Browne. This next year will help pare that list down.

Jack went the rest of 2018 without another fight but could face Browne in early 2019. Browne, who was hit far less putting away Thomas Williams Jr. than Stevenson was, looks much better than the suspect prospect who won a robbery over Radivoje Kalajdzic in 2016.

Bivol owns another of Ward's vacated titles and has defended it against fringe contenders Sullivan Barrera and Isaac Chilemba. He'll face the shell of Jean Pascal in November. Beterbiev picked up the other vacant belt, then spent much of 2018 sidelined as he tried to part with his promoter. He also had to pick himself off the canvas to win a brief but thrilling war with Callum Johnson in October. He could be in for another battle next against Joe Smith Jr., who fell off the map after following up his knockout of Bernard Hopkins with a loss to Barrera.

HBO's exit from boxing may make it even easier to get some of these fights made – a far cry from the day when Stevenson and Kovalev failed to get in the ring with each other. ★

Eleider Alvarez earned The Ring's No. 1 ranking at 175 with his seventh-round KO of former champ Sergey Kovalev.

NEW BLOOD: LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT

JOSHUA BUATSI (U.K.)
8-0 (6 KOs)

The 25-year-old Matchroom-promoted fighter is handled by Anthony Joshua's management company. Born in Ghana, the 2016 Olympic bronze medalist has made an impressive start to his professional career, most recently stopping respectable journeyman Tony Averlant in the first round.

WILLY HUTCHINSON (U.K.)
5-0 (3 KOs)

The young Scottish fighter was a talented amateur, winning gold as a junior at the European and World Championships, and has been tipped to enjoy a successful professional career with the backing of Frank Warren.

ANTHONY YARDE (U.K.)
17-0 (16 KOs)

Yarde has impressively walked through all but one of his opponents since turning professional in May 2015, and the four-round decision was in his second paid outing. All the more impressive given his minimal amateur credentials.

KEEP AN EYE ON:
ALI AKHMEDOV, KIANTE IRVING, CHRISTIAN MONTANO AND ANTHONY SIMS JR.

Unlike the "Super Six" tournament from earlier in the decade, the World Boxing Super Series lacked many of the name super middleweights. It still aired good fights and concluded with Callum Smith stopping George Groves to earn The Ring championship and a world title.

The other titleholders remain unavailable to Smith, which explains why he's trying to entice Gennady Golovkin up to 168. That's a more prestigious fight than Canelo Alvarez's December visit to the division to fight Rocky Fielding, who lost to Smith in one round in 2015.

There just aren't many stars in a division that otherwise has decent talent.

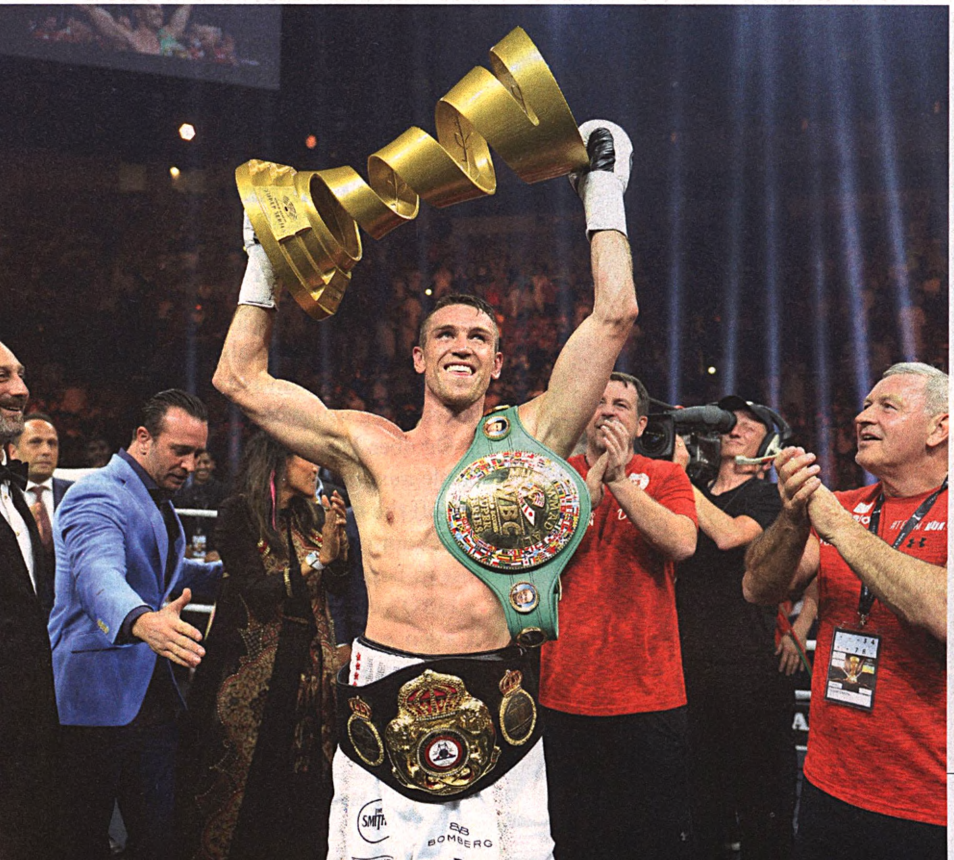
Gilberto Ramirez's team opted not to participate in the WBSS, a decision that seems to have stalled his momentum. His narrow victory in a brawl with Jesse Hart in 2017 was exciting, but Ramirez's two wins since came against a lower tier of opponent. A rematch with Hart was scheduled for December.

James DeGale had his shot at the championship, fighting to a draw with Badou Jack, and was then sidelined by injuries and surgery that perhaps contributed to how he looked in an upset loss to Caleb Truax, and even in a win in their rematch. DeGale vacated his title and will possibly face Chris Eubank Jr., who himself needs to improve after being outboxed by Groves in the WBSS semifinal.

DeGale's belt was picked up by Jose Uzcategui, a rugged fighter who stopped Andre Dirrell in their rematch and will defend against unbeaten prospect Caleb Plant in 2019. Plant is returning from a hand injury.

And another vacant title will belong to the winner of Anthony Dirrell vs. Avni Yildirim. Each has won five straight, but those last losses say everything you need to know: Dirrell dropped a close one (and his belt) to Jack, while Yildirim was bombed out in three rounds by Eubank.

The belt they're fighting for used to belong to David Benavidez, who was demoted to "champion in recess" after a positive cocaine test. He's expected to be back around March, with the right to challenge whomever holds the title.



The WBSS gave the unbeaten-but-unsung Callum Smith an opportunity to prove he's the best super middleweight in the game.

NEW BLOOD: SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHT

AZIZBEK ABDUGOFUROV (UZBEKISTAN)
11-0 (4 KOs)

The 26-year-old has moved quickly and is already world-rated after nearly shutting out Dmitry Chudinov in May. He lives in Kuala Lumpur and is building a following in Southeast Asia.

JANIBEK ALIMKHANULY (KAZAKHSTAN)
4-0 (1 KO)

Alimkhanuly initially took his time in the pros after reaching the quarterfinals of the 2016 Olympics, but the southpaw has hooked up with Egis Klimas and Top Rank, relocated to California and appears ready to get serious after narrowly outpointing capable Vaughn Alexander in his most recent bout.

KEEP AN EYE ON:
D'MITRIUS BALLARD, ERIK BAZINYAN, VLADIMIR SHISHKIN, LOUIS TOUTIN AND JUNIOR YOUNAN.

There's a lot that still needs to be shaken out at 168. This next year will eject fighters who don't belong anymore (or never did), and it could slowly set up big matches between top fighters, especially because Benavidez, DeGale, Dirrell, Plant and Truax all work with Al Haymon. The super middleweight division has long felt divided between American and European factions. That will most likely remain the case in the near future, regardless of any Golovkin or Canelo sojourns. ★

Ring middleweight champ Canelo Alvarez ended 2018 with a foray into the 168-pound division.

NEW BLOOD: MIDDLEWEIGHT

CHRISTIAN MBILLI (FRANCE)
12-0 (12 KOs)

Mbilli was born in Cameroon, represented France at the Olympics, then teamed up with Canadian outfit GYM, which co-promotes the 23-year-old with French boxing star Brahim Asloum. He splits his time between fighting in France and Canada, but has worked his way into the WBC's top 20.

KEEP AN EYE ON:
ARTEM CHEBOTAREV, MEIIRIM NURSULTANOV, MONEY POWELL IV AND LESHAWN RODRIGUEZ.

The two best middleweights in the world have fought each other twice, and there's still debate about who is better. But it's time for Canelo Alvarez and Gennady Golovkin to step away from each other for a bit and give other 160-pounders a shot. The division is just too talented, and therefore too interesting, for that not to happen.

Canelo triumphed over Golovkin in their rematch with a razor-thin majority decision, a fair result in a fight that could've gone either way. And he's not taking his customary break between September's and May's traditional big fight weekends. Instead, Canelo will jump up to 168 – not as big a deal as it sounds, as he's challenging Rocky Fielding for the WBA's "regular" paper title.

But at least Canelo's staying busy, which could become a theme, thanks to his massive contract with DAZN. With HBO ditching boxing, Golovkin, still a free agent at press time, could end up on the streaming service as well. Golovkin's next fight hasn't been set; Rob Brant's upset of Ryota Murata threw a wrench in those plans.

There's plenty of other quality opposition at 160.

Jermall Charlo is a very good fighter with a magnetic personality who entered the division in 2017 after a good run at 154. Alas, Charlo has taken out two unrated middleweights since and will face Willie Monroe this December. While Willie Monroe Jr. landed leather on Golovkin in 2015, he was soon stopped. He then lost a decision to Billy Joe Saunders in 2017.

Charlo's with Al Haymon and fights on Premier Boxing Champions cards. There's not much going on at 160 in that stable, but Charlo's at least in line for a shot at one of Canelo's belts. Hopefully he's willing to fight on DAZN and a deal can be made, because he has a real chance at winning.

If not, there are other options available. Former 154-pound titleholder Demetrius Andrade was supposed to challenge then-titleholder Saunders on DAZN in October, but Saunders tested positive for a banned substance. Andrade thus widely outpointed a late replacement for the suddenly vacant belt. Andrade continues to be his own worst enemy, though, taking his foot off the gas against an opponent he was well on his way to stopping.

Daniel Jacobs, meanwhile, entertained on HBO in his third straight win since dropping a debated decision to Golovkin. Jacobs bested training partner Sergiy Derevyanchenko, who showed promise and skill but still needs to develop more before facing another top-level foe. Jacobs is with Eddie Hearn, who's working with DAZN, so don't be surprised if he lands there as well.

Jacobs has been mentioned as a potential May opponent for Canelo, but we're more likely to see The Ring champ take on someone less skilled, if still dangerous, after the Fielding fight. He and David Lemieux are both with Golden Boy Promotions, after all.

No matter the debate over who's the No. 1 at 160, Canelo is the lone superstar. Golovkin remains an attraction, too. If they don't fight again for some time, then they can make matches with these other contenders and a couple of rising prospects. And even if a third go-around comes sooner rather than later, the rest of the division seems primed to make good fights that will separate the wheat from the chaff. ★

Jarrett Hurd (right) won the most significant junior middleweight fight of 2018 by outpointing Erislandy Lara.

There is one fight that truly must be made at 154. Little else matters – for now.

Jarrett Hurd has two world titles after beating Tony Harrison for a vacant belt, then stopping Austin Trout and unifying with a split decision over Erislandy Lara. Jermell Charlo has a title too, having rallied to stop John Jackson for a vacant belt, then came into his own as he plowed through Charles Hatley, demolished top prospect Erickson Lubin and defeated Trout.

They are heavy-hitting junior middleweights who are in the same stable. They want to face each other, with the winner becoming the division's true top fighter.

We may only have to wait just a little longer.

Hurd is returning from rotator cuff surgery and is scheduled to face unheralded Jason Welborn in early December. Charlo will defend against Harrison later that month. These fights don't do much beyond get Hurd back in the ring and set up a big collision in 2019.

The other titleholder in the division is Jaime Munguia, whose win over Sadam Ali in May earned The Ring's 2017 Prospect of the Year worldwide recognition – an opportunity that had eluded him when the Nevada commission denied the Tijuana native a chance to challenge Gennady Golovkin at 160. Munguia fought twice more over the next four months, outpointing Liam Smith and scoring a quick TKO of Brandon Cook. Despite the belt, his team should manage the 22-year-old carefully, simultaneously building him as a star while allowing him to develop further before taking on the upper echelon of junior middleweights.

There really isn't anyone else in that echelon besides Hurd, Charlo and perhaps Lara.

Julian Williams was a rising contender himself before falling to Jermell's twin brother, Jermall. He's won three straight since and could face Takeshi Inoue to become Hurd's mandatory. Unbeaten Brian Castano is at last stepping up and could face Lara early next year. Michel Soro lost a split decision to Castano and remains on the periphery. And Kell Brook was set to have his second fight at 154, taking on Michael Zerafa, who is best known for losing to Peter Quillin.

That's not exactly a murderer's row of potential challengers. And the top echelon might not even stick around much longer. Charlo, Hurd and Munguia could all easily grow into middleweights in the very near future. ★

NEW BLOOD: JUNIOR MIDDLEWEIGHT

SOULEYMANE CISSOKHO (FRANCE)
7-0 (5 KOs)

Cissokho was born in Senegal but represented France at the 2016 Olympics, winning bronze. At 27, he is physically mature and already fighting 10-round contests.

JOEY SPENCER (U.S.)
5-0 (5 KOs)

The two-time U.S. junior champion turned professional on his 18th birthday and hasn't gone past the second round yet.

EIMANTAS STANIONIS (LITHUANIA)
7-0 (5 KOs)

The 24-year-old Olympic quarterfinalist has earned rave reviews since signing with Ringstar and working under Freddie Roach's tutelage.

KEEP AN EYE ON:
CARLOS ADAMES, SERHII BOHACHUK, CHARLES CONWELL, ZSOLT DARANYI, FERDINAND KEROBYAN, TRAVELL MAZION, MOHAMMED RABII, TIM TSZYU AND SERGEY VOROBIEV.

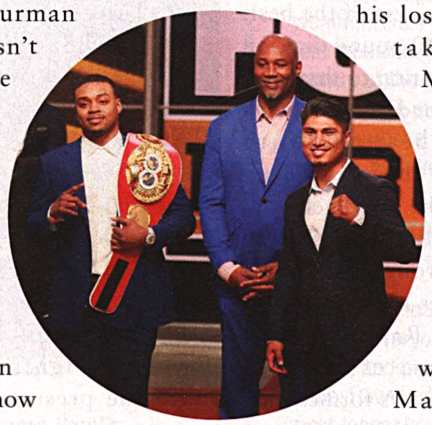
It's a familiar theme: There's a lot of talent at 147, but the fight we care most about is the one we're least likely to see. This time, we're not talking about Mayweather-Pacquiao, but rather Errol Spence vs. Terence Crawford.

Spence and Crawford are two of the best boxers, pound-for-pound. Their promoters don't really work with each other, though, and have significant TV deals that make big cross-promotional fights less likely.

It's a shame, because there isn't much left of note for Crawford, who seized a title from Jeff Horn in June, making him a three-division titleholder, then went on to stop Jose Benavidez Jr. Somewhat shockingly, his next foe is rumored to be former titleholder Luis Collazo, who is 37. Crawford is getting paid well and has the ESPN spotlight. He'd been willing to face everyone at 140 – it's how he became undisputed champ – but the business and politics of the sport are clearly getting in the way now.

Spence at least has plenty available in the deep PBC stable, even if his next fight is actually going to be against a rising 135-pound titleholder, Mikey Garcia, in March. His potential opponents include Adrien Broner, Shawn Porter, Keith Thurman, Yordenis Ugas and even the newest addition – one Manny Pacquiao.

Porter wanted Spence; they stood next to each other and said as much after Porter beat Danny Garcia in September for a vacant title. Instead, Porter – who's also spent time waiting for a Thurman rematch that hasn't come – will face mandatory challenger Ugas in March. Another mandatory will be due after that: Andre Berto, who lost to Porter in 2017 but recently beat Devon Alexander to somehow earn another shot.



Errol Spence (left) will headline a major PPV fight thanks to Mikey Garcia.

Garcia has lost two of his last three, dropping competitive decisions to Thurman and Porter. He still deserves another chance. As for Thurman, he's been recovering from injuries and enjoying life away from the sport. Though he'd be able to return into an immediate title shot, Thurman will ease his way back with a rust-shaking fight against Josesito Lopez in January.

Pacquiao signing with Haymon opened the doors to plenty of fights previously out of reach. It's fun to imagine him against many of those names, even as he nears 40 year old, because a 39-year-old Pacquiao still showed glimpses of his younger self when he bounced back from his loss to Jeff Horn by taking out Lucas Matthysse. Except we're more likely to see Pacquiao vs. Broner first – no gimme for Pacquiao, since memories of Pacquiao being caught with Juan Manuel Marquez's perfect counter still come to mind – and potentially even a rematch with Mayweather afterward.

That's fine. While it'd be wonderful to see fights like Pacquiao vs. Thurman, the rest of the division has been deep enough to thrive without Manny or Floyd. It looks like 2019 could be a good year for the PBC welterweights. And if Crawford can get a big fight or two as well, the year will be even better. ★

NEW BLOOD: WELTERWEIGHT

QUDRATILLO ABDUQAXOROV (UZBEKISTAN)
15-0 (9 KOs)

Moving quickly, looking for a world title opportunity as soon as next year, Abduqaxorov is based in Malaysia but has twice traveled to America for training camp. The four-time national champion had 180 amateur fights, giving him a solid foundation.

RADZHAB BUTAEV (RUSSIA)
10-0 (8 KOs)

Although only 24, Butaev had more than 450 amateur bouts. The two-time national champion is managed by Vadim Kornilov and promoted by Lou DiBella.

JARON ENNIS (U.S.)
21-0 (19 KOs)

Ennis narrowly missed out on the Olympics but preferred to focus his attention toward the professional game anyway. He has been very active since, already headlining twice on Showtime's "ShoBox" series, resulting in early stoppages of previously unbeaten Armando Alvarez and former prospect Raymond Serrano.

JOSH KELLY (U.K.)
8-0 (6 KOs)

The flashy Englishman was a good amateur and was moved quickly by Matchroom to a Commonwealth title under the guidance of trainer Adam Booth.

DANIYAR YELEUSSINOV (KAZAKHSTAN)
4-0 (2 KOs)

Yeleussinov won gold at the Olympics before signing with Matchroom. He's a skilled southpaw with a well-rounded game.

KEEP AND EYE ON:
BRIAN CEBALLO, POINDEXTER KNIGHT, PAUL KROLL, SERGEY LUBKOVICH, THULANI MBENGE, AARON MCKENNA AND ALEXIS ROCHA.

Typically when a unified champion vacates, the remaining fighters scavenge his belts and then hold on to them by facing lesser opposition rather than truly earning the top spot by fighting the rest of the best.

Right now, the 140-pound division is a wonderful exception to that rule.

Terence Crawford parted with his titles after beating Julius Indongo in 2017, then moved up to welterweight. The four men who picked them up are trying to stand out – doing so through the World Boxing Super Series tournament, or via a series of Top Rank-promoted fights on ESPN. None of the names involved are Crawford's former foes. They are fresh faces, rising prospects when Crawford was around but now ready to step up in their own right.

The WBSS semifinalists are Regis Prograis, Josh Taylor, Kiryl Relikh and Ivan Baranchyk.

Prograis went from blasting out fellow prospect Joel Diaz Jr. to doing the same to Indongo, taking him out in two – one round quicker than Crawford did. He kicked off the WBSS by taking a wide decision over Terry Flanagan, a former 135-pound titleholder who'd fallen short months before against Maurice Hooker.

Taylor, like Prograis, was a prospect who attracted a lot of attention and has fulfilled the hype so far. He went from humbling fellow prospect Ohara Davies to taking out another Crawford foe, outpointing Viktor Postol in June. Taylor's first WBSS bout saw him stop unbeaten rising lightweight Ryan Martin.

Prograis and Taylor, The Ring's Nos. 1- and 2-rated junior welterweights, are the presumed favorites to meet in the finals. Neither has a title yet. Their upcoming opponents do. Relikh had lost a pair of fights to Ricky Burns and Rances Barthelemy, though the latter was controversial and Relikh righted that wrong in their rematch. He outpointed Eduard Troyanovsky in the WBSS to earn a fight with Prograis in the semis. Baranchyk, meanwhile, picked up a vacant belt with an impressive bludgeoning of Anthony Yigit and has Taylor next.

Josh Taylor continues to exhibit his class and vast potential.

Jose Ramirez and his team opted not to participate in the tournament, believing he had better opportunities without it. He's a big attraction in Fresno, California, where he recently defended his newly won title by winning a battle with unbeaten Antonio Orozco. He'll probably have an easier opponent for his next outing before aiming at unification later in 2019.

That would be against Maurice Hooker, who got up from a second-round knockdown and stopped Alex Saucedo in the seventh round of a Nov. 16 thriller in Saucedo's hometown of Oklahoma City. That will be a good fight and will probably have the benefit of the ESPN spotlight.

Crawford was the one true champion before 2018. By the end of 2019, we could have two remaining fighters vying to be king. Hopefully they will finish what they started. ★

NEW BLOOD: JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHT

LINDOLFO DELGADO (MEXICO)
7-0 (7 KOs)

The 23-year-old represented his country at the Rio Olympics, turned pro under the Ringstar banner and trains with Robert Garcia.

SHAKHRAM GIYASOV (UZBEKISTAN)
5-0 (4 KOs)

He entered the professional ranks after winning Olympic silver in 2016 and gold at the 2017 world championships.

FABIAN MAIDANA (ARGENTINA)
16-0 (12 KOs)

Arguably the best prospect in South America, the 26-year-old younger brother of Marcos Maidana doesn't have his sibling's power but is more skilled and rounded as a fighter.

SUBRIEL MATIAS (PUERTO RICO)
12-0 (12 KOs)

Quite advanced for a prospect, the 26-year-old southpaw possesses fight-ending power and has already used it to take down some solid opposition, including Mexican fringe contender Adrian Estrella.

VERGIL ORTIZ (U.S.)
11-0 (11 KOs)

The young Texan has impressed everyone with his power and maturity (he's only 20). He reportedly dropped former title-holder Lucas Matthysse in sparring. The Robert Garcia-trained boxer-puncher was added to the December 15 Canelo Alvarez-Rocky Fielding undercard at press time.

KEEP AN EYE ON: BATYR AKHMEDOV, JOSEPH BONAS, LUIS FELICIANO, FAZLIDDIN GAIBNAZAROV, RICHARDSON HITCHINS, BATYRZHAN JUKEMBAYEV, BRANDUN LEE, JONATHAN NAVARRO AND DANIELITO ZORRILLA.

Ring lightweight champ Vasiliy Lomachenko is ready to unify titles.

This isn't a deep division. It hasn't been for some time. And despite the fact that two pound-for-pound elites competed at lightweight in 2018, they're highly unlikely to fight each other.

Vasiliy Lomachenko arrived at 135 in May and challenged Jorge Linares. Lomachenko came off the canvas and went on to score the stoppage, winning a world title and the Ring championship, giving him belts in three divisions in just 12 fights.

Mikey Garcia, meanwhile, returned to lightweight after a brief run at 140, where he became a four-division titleholder. Garcia unified two titles at 135 with a clear victory over Robert Easter. His options afterward included Lomachenko or mandatory challenger Richard Commey. Instead, Garcia vacated one belt and is jumping up to welterweight for a difficult yet admirable challenge of Errol Spence.

Not that Lomachenko's team was holding out hope for a Garcia fight. Lomachenko took some time off in mid-2018 to recuperate from surgery on his right shoulder, which he hurt in the Linares fight. For his return, they had been eyeing unification via the powerful yet limited Ray Beltran. Jose Pedraza took advantage of Beltran's limitations first, seizing his title by decision. The victory reinvigorated Pedraza's career a year and a half after Gervonta Davis sent him packing from 130. It also earned Pedraza a fight with Lomachenko set for early December.

There's talk that 130-pound titleholder Miguel Berchelt could step up to face Lomachenko next. Perhaps Davis and Alberto Machado will follow someday.

Davis might be the only one who could entice Lomachenko to stick around at 135, if that fight could even be made, but the temptation for the Ukrainian to move up again is reasonable. Though he would be pushing himself into perilous territory, there's little else of note for him at lightweight.

Easter needs to rebuild. Commey has bounced back from two losses, including a close one to Easter, and will likely face Isa Chaniev for Garcia's vacant belt. Luke Campbell deserves a shot despite his competitive loss to Linares. Devin Haney, who just turned 20, is a top prospect but still too young. ★

NEW BLOOD: LIGHTWEIGHT

JOE CORDINA (U.K.)
8-0 (6 KOs)

Cordina fought at three world championships, won Commonwealth bronze and is a European gold medalist. He represented his country at the 2016 Olympics and reached the quarterfinals. Since turning pro, he has won the Commonwealth title.

RYAN GARCIA (U.S.)
16-0 (13 KOs)

The hugely popular 20-year-old has wowed everyone with his hand-speed and personality on social media. However, he struggled in his most recent bout (a majority decision over fringe contender Carlos Morales) and now needs to prove Golden Boy correct by showing he's got steak to go with all the sizzle. Garcia, who recently took on Canelo Alvarez's trainer, Eddy Reynoso, was added to the Canelo-Fielding undercard at press time.

DEVIN HANEY (U.S.)
20-0 (13 KOs)

Having turned pro at just 16, "The Dream" has been a nightmare for his opponents so far, blessed with sublime speed and skills. Now 20, Haney promotes himself and has a deal with ShoBox.

TEOFIMO LOPEZ (U.S.)
10-0 (8 KOs)

Lopez represented Honduras at the 2016 Olympics, then elected to turn professional under the Top Rank banner. He made an impressive start to his pro career before a fractured hand put him on the sidelines. The flamboyant 21-year-old Brooklyn native was scheduled to face veteran Mason Menard on December 8 at press time.

KEEP AND EYE ON: JOSEPH ADORNO, KARLOS BALDERAS AND DENYS BERINCHYK.

Top junior lightweight Miguel Berchelt is in need of a worthy challenge.

Vasiliy Lomachenko's departure for lightweight left a lack of star power at 130. That could be fixed if the best fighters in the division would face each other.

Miguel Berchelt's reign began when he unseated Francisco Vargas two years ago. There's been a decline in opposition since. He retired former titleholder Takashi Miura, easily dispatched Maxwell Awuku and Jonathan Victor Barros, and fended off a game but clearly outmatched Miguel Roman. He's said to be considering a jump to 135 to face Lomachenko, a brave challenge that wouldn't end well for him.

Gervonta Davis has an impressive combination of power, speed and ring savvy. Yet he's fought just once this year. He could return in 2019 against Abner Mares. It's also uncertain how long he can make 130; he came in overweight for a 2017 fight. (Davis, by the way, was gifted the WBA's "super" title without any rhyme or reason for his win over Jesus Cuellar, instantly demoting Alberto Machado, the "regular" titleholder.)

Machado got off the canvas to stop overweight Jezreel Corrales for a title in 2017. All he's done since is shut out Rafael Mensah and make quick work of Yuandale Evans. He might face Vargas next. It's not unification, but it should be fun and could help make Machado a bigger name among Puerto Rican fans.

Skilled boxer Tevin Farmer has improved considerably after four losses early in his career. He won a vacant title with a decision over Billy Dib and has made one defense since. Farmer's promoters are keeping him busy, looking to build him up. Scott Quigg's been named as a potential foe.

Masayuki Ito has a homecoming fight set in Japan in December against Evgeny Chuprakov. Don't let geography discount the potential for unification if he wins. Ito won his vacant belt in Florida by beating Christopher Diaz in July.

Unification should be the priority, given that the rest of the division is mostly also-rans on the decline and young prospects still on the rise. They certainly say the right things. Machado and Berchelt called out their fellow titleholders after recent victories. Davis and Farmer have jawed at each other on Twitter. There's been no other progress, though. Hopefully that changes in 2019. ★

NEW BLOOD: JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHT

ELNUR ABDURAIMOV (UZBEKISTAN)
3-0 (3 KOs)

The 24-year-old southpaw only turned professional a few months ago, thus only fought in four-round bouts in 2018, but given his maturity and amateur experience he figures to quickly advance to the six- and eight-round level. He won bronze at the 2015 World Championships.

EDUARDO HERNANDEZ (MEXICO)
27-0 (24 KOs)

The big-punching 20-year-old has worked his way into the WBC's top three with an 89 percent KO ratio. Is he the next big star from Mexico?

KEEP AN EYE ON:
CHRIS COLBERT, ROBSON CONCEICAO, MICHAEL DUTCHOVER, GABRIEL FLORES JR., AZINGA FUZILE, HENRY LEBRON AND LAMONT ROACH JR.

The best 126-pounders just aren't fighting often enough. Of the four titleholders at featherweight, only one had more than one appearance in 2018 (at least if the schedule at the time of publication holds true). That's unfortunate. All have otherwise had good victories this year. But if things play out right, we could get at least one big fight between them in 2019.

We didn't get Leo Santa Cruz vs. Gary Russell Jr. in 2018. Instead, Santa Cruz again outpointed Abner Mares in their rematch, while Russell proved too good for Joseph Diaz Jr. Neither winner has fought since. The WBC has taken the rare step of mandating a fight between its titleholder (Russell) and Santa Cruz. That's more appealing than Russell vs. mandatory challenger Mark Magsayo, and certainly more than Santa Cruz's meaningless voluntary title defense against unrated Miguel Flores in February. Russell has also mentioned moving up to 130 if he can't get a big fight at 126.

Oscar Valdez was sidelined for the remainder of the year after suffering a broken jaw and other punishment in his win over Scott Quigg. He's expected to return soon for his first fight under Eddy Reynoso, who trains Canelo Alvarez. Valdez's promoter, Bob Arum of Top Rank, has said he'd like a fight later in the year against the winner of December's bout between Josh Warrington and Carl Frampton.

Leo Santa Cruz (left), who fought only once in 2018, begins 2019 with a distracting matchup against Miguel Flores.

That will be Warrington's second fight of 2018. He took a split decision over Lee Selby for the IBF title in May. The Frampton fight will be an all-Brit extravaganza and comes nearly two years after Frampton lost his title to Santa Cruz in their rematch. Frampton still wants the rubber match. ★

NEW BLOOD: FEATHERWEIGHT

MICHAEL CONLAN (IRELAND)
9-0 (6 KOs)

Conlan won a slew of amateur titles and bronze at the 2012 Olympics before infamously exiting the ring with middle fingers blazing in Rio. Fighting for Top Rank, he is already a proven draw for both live and broadcast audiences.

MARK MAGSAYO (PHILIPPINES)
18-0 (13 KOs)

Magsayo, 23, has moved quickly and is already ranked No. 1 by two of the sanctioning bodies. He left the Philippines to train in the U.S with Nonito Donaire and is guided by Cameron Dunkin and Vikram Sivapragasam.

SHAKUR STEVENSON (U.S.)
9-0 (5 KOs)

Stevenson is managed by former pound-for-pound king Andre Ward and has signed with promoter Top Rank. The 21-year-old Olympic silver medalist is very quick and demonstrated uncommon maturity in his most recent outing, a first-round knockout of Viorel Simion.

KEEP AN EYE ON:
VLADIMIR NIKITIN, TUGSTSOGT NYAMBAYAR, MANUEL ROBLES III, SATOSHI SHIMIZU, RUBEN VILLA IV AND TRAMAINE WILLIAMS.

The 122-pound division moved on without Guillermo Rigondeaux, though Rigondeaux has made moves to return.

The biggest story is Isaac Dogboe, who went from unknown to unmissable in 2018. He bombed out Cesar Juarez, came off the canvas to stop Jessie Magdaleno late for a title, then made short work of Hidenori Otake. His fourth fight of the year was set for December, a dangerous defense against Emanuel Navarette, who lost once early in his career and has won 20 straight since. Beating that mandatory would leave Dogboe free for big fights in 2019.

Rey Vargas was far less active in 2018, taking time off after beating Azat Hovhannisyan for surgery on his left hand and also dealing with a case of pneumonia. He could face Franklin Manzanilla, who recently stopped former titleholder Julio Ceja. And he'll owe a mandatory to Tomoki Kameda, who outpointed Abigail Medina in November.

The enjoyable Daniel Roman made three defenses this year: decisions over Ryo Matsumoto and a pair of good measuring sticks – Moises Flores (who suffered a late hit knockout in a "no contest" with Rigondeaux) and Gavin McDonnell (whom Vargas beat for a vacant title). Roman wants unification, and his deal with DAZN could help make that happen. Another possibility is unbeaten contender Diego De La Hoya, as Golden Boy Promotions is also working with the streaming network.

It helps that all of the titleholders have been willing to travel to get fights made. That includes TJ Doheny, the Australia-based Irishman who went to Japan to unseat Ryosuke Iwasa. Doheny will owe a fight to the winner of a mandated bout between Juarez and Thomas Ward.

Magdaleno remains in the picture after the Dogboe loss; he plans to stay at 122 and hopes for a rematch. He's yet to return, though. Ditto for Rigondeaux, who recently signed with Premier Boxing Champions and has spent the year on the sideline after 2017's loss to Vasiliy Lomachenko at 130.

That's a big deal. PBC has plenty of TV dates and the money that comes with them. Perhaps that will at last appeal to the junior featherweight standouts who believed there was too much risk and too little reward for facing Rigondeaux.★

NEW BLOOD: JUNIOR FEATHERWEIGHT:

MURODJON AKHMADALIEV (UZBEKISTAN)
4-0 (3 KOs)

A 2016 Olympic bronze medalist who is moving very quickly since turning professional in March 2018. The 23-year-old southpaw appears to possess good power and an impressive skill set. Like many of his brethren, he has relocated to Southern California to train.

KEEP AN EYE ON: JOSHUA GREEN JR. AND ARNOLD KHEGAI.

Isaac Dogboe is the breakout sensation of the 122-pound division.

Naoya Inoue's bantamweight invasion has been explosive so far.

The World Boxing Super Series tournament is already a nitro injection for a weight class that sorely needed it.

There was a vacuum at the top of the division. Shinsuke Yamanaka was once the best at 118 before losing to Luis Nery – except Nery tested positive for a banned substance. Yamanaka was destroyed even quicker in the rematch, but Nery was three pounds overweight. Meanwhile, Zolani Tete had found a second home in the U.K. but was with a different promoter than the country's other top bantamweights, Ryan Burnett and Jamie McDonnell.

Fast-forward to 2018, and the tournament has put the three titleholders (Yamanaka's WBC is vacant for just a bit longer) in with each other, plus other notable stars in Naoya Inoue and Nonito Donaire.

Inoue arrived at 118 earlier in the year with a first-round demolition of McDonnell, then kicked the WBSS off by taking just 70 seconds to do the same to former titleholder Juan Carlos Payano. Inoue's semifinal foe is titleholder Emmanuel Rodriguez, who edged Jason Moloney.

Tete defeated Mikhail Aloyan to move on, yet he needs a standout win after his last two bouts resulted in lackluster decisions. Most thought he'd face Burnett next. After all, Burnett had beaten Lee Haskins and Zhanat Zhakiyanov. And his quarterfinal opponent, Donaire, is on the tail end of his career and had to come down in weight. Burnett-Donaire was competitive, though, until Burnett hurt his back while throwing a punch and was unable to continue. Donaire surprisingly has one last run at greatness.

The WBSS winner will leave as the clear champion at 118 and will be a strong candidate for 2019's Fighter of the Year.

There will still be a slate of challengers waiting for him, including fighters who suffered defeats (Burnett and Moloney); the winner of December's WBC title fight between Takuma Inoue – Naoya's brother – and Petch Sor Chitpattana; and Luis Nery, who made weight in his return outing. Nery looked like a beast against Yamanaka but is understandably incredibly tainted. He's also been banned in Japan, which makes fighting the Inoues more difficult.★

NEW BLOOD: BANTAMWEIGHT

CARLOS CARABALLO (PUERTO RICO)
9-0 (9 KOS)

The heavy-handed Puerto Rican is promoted by Miguel Cotto, who brought him to America in the summer to get him more attention on the Jaime Munguia-Liam Smith undercard.

JOSHUA FRANCO (U.S.)
14-1-1 (9 KOs)

The 23-year-old from Texas began the year with the first setback of his professional career, a ninth-round stoppage to Lucas Fernandez Leone in March. Franco, who is trained and managed by Robert Garcia, was ahead on two scorecards prior to what could be called a quick stoppage, but the loss was a cue to move from 115 pounds to 118, where the Golden Boy-promoted technician battled former title challenger Oscar Negrete to a rousing 10-round draw in October. There is talk of Franco rematching Leone in January.

KEEP AN EYE ON: NAREK ABGARYAN, CARL JAMMES MARTIN AND LEE MCGREGOR.

Ring champ Srisaket Sor Rungvisai has embraced his star status in Thailand.

HBO's spotlight on Roman Gonzalez brought big fights to the 115-pound weight class and led to the network's "Superfly" shows, which attracted even more talent to an already incredibly deep division. Gonzalez has since been knocked out and off his pedestal. HBO is getting out of boxing. The last Superfly card brought in low ratings. But the big fights should keep happening on other networks.

After all, you can put any of the top names together and get good action. The champ among them is Srisaket Sor Rungvisai, who followed his KO of Gonzalez with a close decision over Juan Francisco Estrada to start the year. Sor Rungvisai stayed busy after with a non-title bout and then a decision over Iran Diaz. He could have a unification bout against Jerwin Ancajas in 2019.

Ancajas needs to perform better in his next fight after an ugly win over Jonas Sultan and then a surprising draw against Alejandro Barrios. The other titleholder is Khalid Yafai, a good talent who defended this year against a pair of also-rans: David Carmona and, after we went to press, Israel Gonzalez. Next year should be different, whether Yafai lands a fight with Gonzalez or faces rising prospect Andrew Moloney.

Kazuto Ioka and Donnie Nietes are scheduled to fight for a vacant belt on New Year's Eve. They arrived at 115 for the Superfly 3 card in September; Ioka outpointed McWilliams Arroyo, while Nietes was held to a draw with Aston Palicte despite appearing to win. Estrada was on the show, too, outpointing Felipe Orucuta. He's beltless now, but his performance against Sor Rungvisai means he should still be ranked high.

Gonzalez is trying to bounce back. He shook off rust after a year off and obliterated Moises Fuentes on the Canelo-GGG rematch undercard. Up next is former 108-pound titleholder Pedro Guevara in December.

Think that's a lot for one division? There's much more, including Rau'shee Warren, Daigo Higa and Francisco Rodriguez Jr. – former titleholders at 118, 112 and 105, respectively – plus the rebuilding Akira Yaegashi and competitive gatekeeper Arroyo, who gave Carlos Cuadras his last loss.★

NEW BLOOD: JUNIOR BANTAMWEIGHT:

JEYVIER CINTRON (PUERTO RICO)
8-0 (4 KOs)

The silky-smooth 23-year-old is Puerto Rico's first two-time Olympian (having competed in the 2012 and 2016 Games). The son of a former boxer, Cintron is tall (5-foot-8) for the 115-pound division and is promoted by Top Rank.

ALEXANDRU MARIN (ROMANIA)
17-0 (11 KOs)

Since dropping down in weight (from as heavy as junior lightweight), the 26-year-old former Romanian amateur standout (now based in Bethesda, Maryland) has found success against solid 115-pound opposition, winning regional belts in his last two bouts (a second-round KO of Michael Ruiz Jr. and a 10-round split decision over fringe contender Bruno Escalante that should have been a unanimous nod).

KEEP AN EYE ON: JADE BORNEA, KJ CATARAJA, SUNNY EDWARDS AND HAYATE KAJI.

There at last seems to be some stability at 112 after years of the best flyweights moving up to junior bantamweight. This division hasn't been left completely barren, even though it lacks the star power and pound-for-pound presence seen one weight class north.

Once again, not a single titleholder from a year ago is still there today. Donnie Nietes' departure allowed Moruti Mthalane to beat Muhammad Waseem for a vacant belt. That gave the 36-year-old South African his first title since he vacated a belt about five years ago. Mthalane's been around a while – his last loss was to Nonito Donaire in 2008. Artem Dalakian, meanwhile, defeated Brian Viloria to pick up the title left behind by Kazuto Ioka.

On the younger end of the spectrum are Kosei Tanaka, 23, and Cristofer Rosales, 24. Tanaka just matched Vasiliy Lomachenko's mark by winning a title in a third weight class (105, 108, 112) in just 12 fights. It's too early to put Tanaka on Lomachenko's exalted level; he took severe punishment in his final defense at junior flyweight. Rosales, meanwhile, had fallen short in a title eliminator with Andrew Selby in 2017 but bounced back to take out an overweight Daigo Higa. Selby is now aiming for a rematch. The location shouldn't be an issue for Rosales, who's from Nicaragua. He fought Selby in Wales, went to Japan for Higa and then Northern Ireland for a defense against local Olympian Paddy Barnes.

That is a good mentality to have in this division. After all, the top flyweights hail from China, France, Japan, Mexico, Nicaragua, South Africa, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. We'll see whether the titleholders are willing to travel long distances to prove their superiority or if they'll stay closer to the comforts of home.

And that's if they even remain at 112. The allure of losing less weight and fighting for more money and attention remains strong.★

The "grand old man" of the flyweights, Moruti Mthalane, regained the IBF title in 2018.

NEW BLOOD: FLYWEIGHT

JUNTO NAKATANI (JAPAN)
17-0 (12 KOs)

The 20-year-old southpaw may be the future of the division. Nakatani is already battle-tested and appears ready to step onto the world stage, and at 5-foot-7 the Teiken prospect possesses good size for the division.

JOSELITO VELASQUEZ (MEXICO)
7-0 (6 KOs)

The former amateur standout won Pan-Am gold in 2011 and 2015, fought at three world championships and the 2016 Olympics, and is still just 25 years old.

KEEP AN EYE ON:
KENTO HATANAKA, NICO HERNANDEZ AND RYOTA YAMAUCHI.

Hekkie Budler won the Ring championship when he barely edged Ryoichi Taguchi in May. It's hard to see him remaining on top very long. Budler's an old 30, a fighter with little power whose style depends on speed – and, as he ages, has been getting hit more in some very fun fights.

If Taguchi doesn't regain the throne in the rematch he deserves (there is talk that the 31-year-old Japanese veteran can no longer make 108 pounds and may campaign at flyweight), then there are others who stand a very good chance, particularly Ken Shiro, an undefeated prodigy at 14-0. Shiro seized a title from Ganigan Lopez in his 10th pro fight and seems to be getting better, outpointing former titleholder Pedro Guevara, dispatching Lopez in their rematch in just five minutes and putting away former titleholder Milan Melindo.

The rest of the rankings are largely fighters deserving of second chances. That's not always a bad thing. Many of them are good themselves and have just lost to very good opponents. Angel Acosta lost to Kosei Tanaka in his first title shot, then picked up a vacant belt when Tanaka jumped to 112. All of Acosta's wins have been by KO. Felix Alvarado just plowed through Randy Petalcorin for a vacant belt, his 16th straight win following a pair of defeats in title fights.

Carlos Canizales hasn't lost – he had a draw with Taguchi two years ago – and is due a fight with Budler. However, another undefeated Japanese talent, Hiroto Kyoguchi, recently moved to 108 after a reign at 105, arriving with a TKO of undefeated Tibo Monabesa. He will face Budler first on New Year's Eve.

This is a fun division, deep with talent and full of potentially enjoyable matches until some of them inevitably move up in weight to 112. It's a shame that HBO is on its way out of boxing, as junior flyweights otherwise deserve a spotlight to prove they're just as super as the super flyweights. Perhaps the World Boxing Super Series could invest in a tournament. Given the lower cost, it'd get plenty of bang for its buck. ★

NEW BLOOD: JUNIOR FLYWEIGHT:

JESSE RODRIGUEZ (U.S.)
7-0 (4 KOs)

The 18-year-old San Antonio southpaw, who signed with Japan's Teiken Promotions before he turned pro, is the talented younger brother of bantamweight prospect Joshua Franco.

KEEP AN EYE ON:
CHRISTIAN ARANETA AND AGUSTIN MAURO GAUTO.

Hekkie Budler (right) lifted the Ring title from Ryoichi Taguchi in a classic.

Strawweight titleholder Wanheng Menayothin possesses boxing's longest unbeaten streak.

The 105-pound division still belongs to Thai titleholders Knockout CP Freshmart and Wanheng Menayothin. Almost everyone else mentioned here in the past has lost and/or moved up in weight.

Menayothin remains incredibly active with title defenses and non-title bouts. Two of his more substantive wins in an otherwise padded 51-0 record came against Tatsuya Fukuhara and Leroy Estrada.

Freshmart doesn't have the same quantity but makes up for it with quality. He bested Carlos Buitrago twice before capturing a world title against Byron Rojas (who upset now-108-pound Ring champ Hekkie Budler in 2016), and his subsequent defenses included Rey Loreto and former titleholder Chaozhong Xiong (who had just edged prospect Panya Pradabsri).

Unfortunately, there's not much incentive for Freshmart and Menayothin to unify; they share a promoter, and they apparently see no need right now to upset the apple cart.

Meanwhile, we've also said so long to Jose Argumedo, who lost his belt to Hiroto Kyoguchi, who's since gone to junior flyweight. Ryuya Yamanaka was defeated in July by Vic Saludar, the only other titleholder at 105 right now. Mark Barriga and Carlos Licona were slated to fight for the vacant IBF belt on December 1.

There's no telling whether Saludar and Barriga of the Philippines or Licona of Mexico would want to make the lengthy trip into hostile territory to face Freshmart or Menayothin or if they would rather face other opponents.

There are less notable names to choose from. Rojas has won eight straight and had a rematch with Freshmart set in late November. Simphiwe Khonco has put together a four-victory streak since dropping a decision to Budler a few years back, though he's also been painfully inactive in that span. Khonco has been ordered to face Tsubasa Koura, the latest up-and-coming strawweight from Japan. The winner gets a shot at Menayothin.

NEW BLOOD: STRAWWEIGHT:

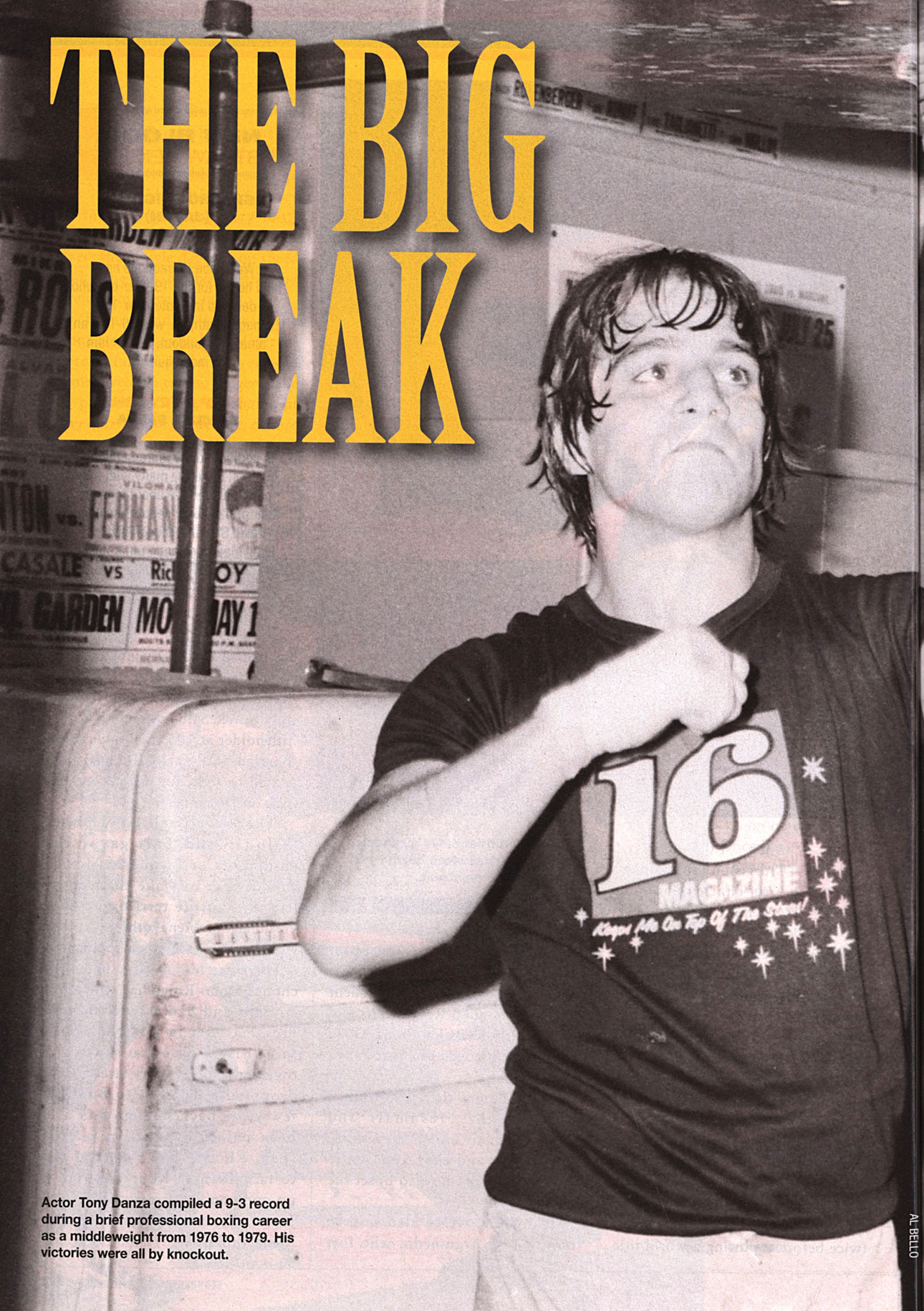
GINJIRO SHIGEOKA (JAPAN)
1-0 (1 KO)

Watanabe Promotions has high hopes for the 19-year-old who debuted in September. The teenage southpaw was 56-1 as an amateur standout. Expect him to move quickly.

KEEP AN EYE ON: SAMUEL SALVA.

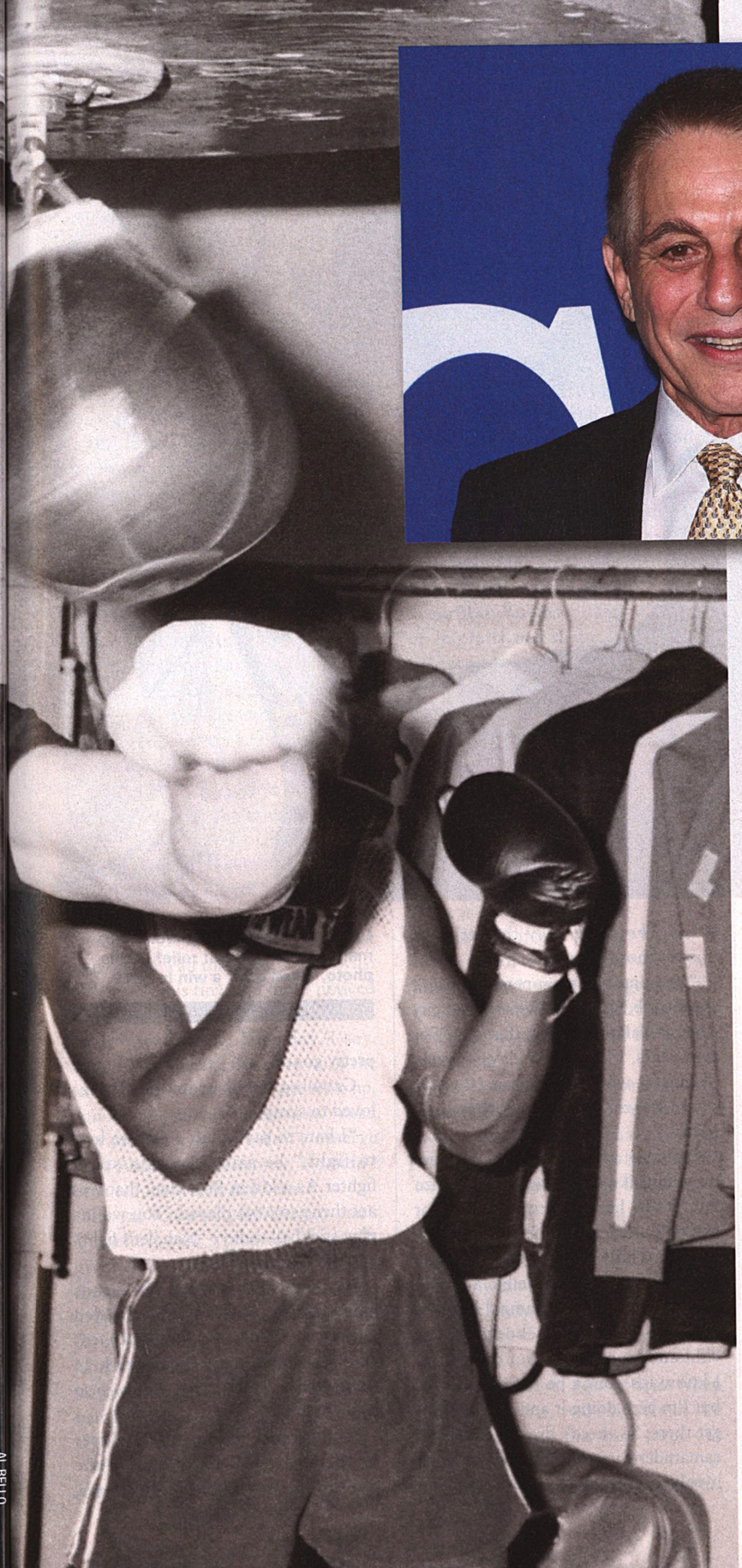
In addition to the aforementioned fighters, there are many with huge potential who are about to make their professional debuts, including David Stevens, Diego Pacheco, Israil Madrimov and, rumor has it, two-time Olympic gold medalist Robeisy Ramirez.

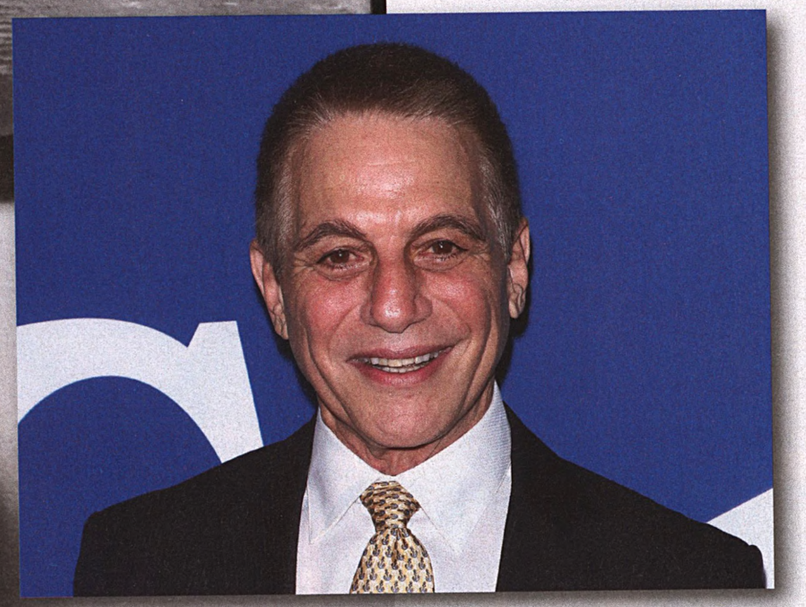
THE BIG BREAK



Actor Tony Danza compiled a 9-3 record during a brief professional boxing career as a middleweight from 1976 to 1979. His victories were all by knockout.

AL BELLO





TONY DANZA WAS A YOUNG, HUNGRY PRO THE DAY SOMEONE WALKED INTO GLEASON'S GYM AND PUT HIM ON COURSE TO BECOMING A STAR – JUST NOT A BOXING STAR

By **Thomas Gerbasi**

The picture still sits on Tony Danza's dresser. It was the night of April 27, 1979, Danza was at the press conference following his first-round knockout of Max Hord, and he was flanked by his parents.

"My mother's got her head up against me with her eyes closed, I'm in my robe, my hands are still wrapped and my father's sitting next to me and he's beaming," said Danza. "People say, 'Look how happy your parents are.' And I say, 'No, that's called relief.'"

He laughs, far removed from his days in the ring, but not from the spotlight. At the time of the Hord

Danza insists that his parents are mainly smiling out of relief in this photo, taken after a win in 1979.

bout at Madison Square Garden's Felt Forum, he was already a budding star playing Tony Banta on the classic television series *Taxi*, and it only got bigger from there, most notably with his run on another beloved series, *Who's the Boss?* These days, Danza is not only starring in the Netflix series *The Good Cop*, but he tours the country with his show *Standards & Stories*, showing that at 68, he's still at the top of his game.

It can almost make you wonder what direction his life would have taken if producer Stuart Sheslow hadn't walked into Gleason's Gym in 1977 looking to cast a boxer in a TV show he was putting together. The middleweight caught his eye that day, Sheslow got his number, gave Danza a call and the rest is history.

Danza still wonders, to the point where he's working on a screenplay titled *The Hard Way* that tries to answer those questions.

"Imagine what happens if I don't get the job," he said. "What if that guy doesn't walk in the gym that day? For two years, I boxed five days a week. What if it would have been 10 years, or 15 years? What does that look like?"

Probably a lot different than it does now. But like any prizefighter, Danza felt like he had the potential to wear championship gold if he got the shot.

"The whole thing about boxing is you're young and invincible and you think you could be champ," he said. "Maybe I'll hit somebody on the chin and be champion of the world. I know it's gonna be tough to do it, but I'm here doing it and maybe I can get there. So there's dreams involved, camaraderie involved. There's so much involved in it, and it just hooks you pretty good."

Growing up in Brooklyn, Danza loved to scrap.

"I hate to say it, but I used to love to fight," he said. "I was a street fighter. As a kid in Brooklyn, that was another game we played. 'You wanna play stickball today?' 'Nah, let's fight.' So I liked to fight."

So much so that when his friends entered him into the 1975 Golden Gloves, he didn't back out, but went all in, earning a quarterfinals berth. In those quarterfinals, things didn't go so well.

"I got knocked out in the Gloves my first year and I woke up in the shower," he laughs. "My trainer says,

'You don't remember, huh?' 'No, what happened?' 'We're going home a little early tonight.'"

It was an omen for his 12-fight pro boxing career. If he got his hands on you, it would be a short night. If his opponent landed, it could be a short night for Danza. But the man dubbed "Tough" Tony always showed up ready to bang under the tutelage of Chickie Ferrara.

"Chickie taught me how to box, and he was a great trainer, but he was not worried about your mental state at all," Danza laughs. "I was fighting in Dover (New Jersey) and it was before the fight. I was nervous and trying not to be, and he took a walk. When he came back, he says, 'Hey, you better get ready quick. The two guys in there now are bleeding like pigs.' He was incredible."

Danza, who turned pro in 1976, lost that fight to Barry Hill, leaving him at 1-2 to start his career. But then he went 6-1 with six knockouts in his next seven, and occasionally he felt like he could conquer the world.

"When you get good at it, you have those days," he said. "I used to go in the gym every once in a while and be Sugar Ray. One day I really had a good day and I was feeling particularly worthy as Chickie was taking my gloves off. And there was a sign on the wall that said, 'Rubdowns: $5.' It was this tiny sign that I noticed over the years, but I never asked anybody about it. That day, I say, 'Hey Chick, what's the story with the rubdowns?' He doesn't even look up, and he said, 'Good fighters don't need 'em and bad fighters don't deserve 'em.' And he walked away. He didn't even tell me which one I was."

Danza was a real fighter, and that's a title he'll wear with pride, especially given the era he came up in. He fought '80s action hero John LoCicero in his second pro bout, competed on cards with the likes of Eddie Mustafa Muhammad, Gerry Cooney and Juan Laporte, and that's not to mention being in Gleason's and the Gramercy Gym in their heyday.

"I knew it was special there," he said. "I knew Gleason's and then the Gramercy was a special thing. But that's the thing about boxing. It is so seductive. The atmosphere at the gym is one of camaraderie; we're all in this together. So it binds people together. And then boxing is like a drug. Once you start doing it, you like it. You even like getting hit, because then you say, 'Look how I stood up to that.'"

The love of the game is still there for Danza, but he admits that these days, it's a love he struggles with.

"I hate to say it, and this is where the guilty pleasure of boxing comes in, but I don't think it ends great," he admits. "This is not Arthur Mercante holding your hand up. It doesn't happen that way. It bothers me when I think about the greatest fighters of all time: (Muhammad) Ali, (Joe) Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, they all ended up in pretty bad shape. And Ali was the worst because he knew where he was. The other guys, they didn't know. It's a tough way to make a living, and I have problems with boxing right now. I feel like too many times it's a mismatch, it's not a competitive fight, and it's always against somebody durable – so you gotta watch somebody get a beating. And with what we know about the damage it does makes it already a guilty pleasure. So if you put the viewer in that kind of a situation where you have to watch somebody get beat up because it's not a competitive fight, and you just paid 60 bucks for it, then something's wrong."

It was assumed that once Danza hit the small screen in a big way, his ring career would be over. That's not the way he saw it. In fact, he believed his newfound fame might be the ticket to his big fight.

"I thought I could turn this TV show into a title shot," he laughs. "I get lucky, hit somebody on the chin, I'll be champion of the world and have a series. I could dream. I was young and I was a dreamer."

He had a dream fight of sorts when he beat Hord in two minutes at the Felt Forum, and the stars came out to see one of their own.

"Arthur Mercante was the referee, I fought in the Garden ring; that was pretty cool," he recalled. "And everybody was there – everybody from *Taxi*, my family, Merv Griffin. It was one the great nights of my life."

Less than a month later, Danza was in Arizona and fighting Johnny Heard. It would be his last pro fight.

"He hit me on the chin with a punch that I shouldn't have been hit with," Danza said. "And the reason I got hit with it is because I was thinking that I hope he doesn't hit me in the nose because I had to go back to TV. All of a sudden that was on my mind, something that never entered my mind when I was fighting. I was worried about my appearance, and I get hit on the chin. I should have gone to sleep, but I don't know what kept me up. Then I come back and win the fight. Really, he quit after that. He was looking for a soft place to land after that. I should have got knocked out, and I think of myself on Entertainment Tonight knocked out. (laughs) But I realized if this guy could hit me with that punch, my mind wasn't right and I had to get out. And that was the end of it."

Danza's final ring tally was 9-3 with nine knockouts, but his career outside the ring was only beginning. And while the escape for many tough kids from Brooklyn in his day was the ring, today there are other options, and he's worked hard as a member of the Police Athletic League's Board of Directors to give New York City teens one of those options through the PAL's Acting program.

"We started with 12 reluctant kids in Harlem a couple years ago and now we're up to 200 kids," he said proudly. "We're recruiting in the five boroughs and we've got three installations going right now – two in Manhattan and one in the Bronx. And the hope is to have a PAL teen after-school acting program in every precinct in the city. This is gonna be a game-changer and I'm so excited about this, because it's so much harder to be a kid these days."

It wasn't easy back then, either. But Tony Danza was tougher than most. Still is.

LAYING IN WAIT

LAYLA MCCARTER HAS BEEN TRYING FOR MUCH OF HER 20-YEAR CAREER TO LAND 'THE BIG ONE,' BUT THE GAME IS GETTING OLD

By **Thomas Gerbasi**

With a calm, cool and collected demeanor and a 5-foot-4, 135-pound frame, Layla McCarter doesn't exactly strike a pose as one of the most intimidating fighters in the world.

But there's got to be a reason why she can't get the marquee fight she's been chasing for much of her two decades in the pro game, right?

"It's strange," McCarter chuckles, as baffled by the turns her career has taken as anyone else who follows the sport is.

A five-division world champ, a tenured member of the pound-for-pound list and someone who made The Ring's list of the top female boxers of all time, you might assume that her legacy in the sport is set. And to hardcore fans, it is. But among casual followers, McCarter is relatively unknown, and as Cecilia Braekhus, Claressa Shields and Katie Taylor make headlines and get coveted television dates, the Las Vegan is nowhere to be found.

It's not from a lack of trying on the side of McCarter, who has called for bouts with the biggest names in the business for years, only to come up empty. And it has taken its toll.

"We just decided the other day that I'm gonna stop chasing Cecilia Braekhus, because it's clear that she doesn't want it," McCarter said. "I'm tired of chasing her, and I'm a natural lightweight anyway, so I'd like to fight Katie Taylor and maybe challenge her in the lightweight division as soon as possible."

The 39-year-old sounds tired. Not physically, but emotionally. Think of being one of the best in your field but not getting the opportunity to prove it against others in that same position. That will drain anyone. And it's gone on long enough that McCarter's optimism is starting to wane.

"I just keep rolling forward," she said. "Am I hopeful as far as the potential to make money in women's boxing? It's kind of hard to stay hopeful."

So what is the holdup? McCarter has been rumored to outprice herself for these bouts at times, but when she knows that there's more money on the table than what she's being offered, she refuses to back down. And while some would say take the short money now, win the fight and then cash in on the rematch, that's no guarantee, especially for a fighter who has fought the majority of her career without a high-powered promoter in her corner.

"I've always been on my own, and that's a hard thing when you don't have a promoter," she said. "The only chance I would get is as an opponent coming in, and they don't want to fight me with their girls."

In 2017, McCarter signed with Mayweather Promotions, but that union hasn't produced fruit yet. She was approached about fighting Claressa Shields when the two-time Olympic gold medalist saw her bout with Christina Hammer scrapped in November 2018, but the fight was going to be at middleweight.

"Have you seen me?" McCarter laughs. "I've been training as a welterweight for a good four, five years, but I'm not a welterweight even. I'm a lightweight."

Shields has been one of the few high-profile names to mention a fight with McCarter, and so has undisputed welterweight queen Braekhus. McCarter even fought her way into a mandatory position for a shot at the Norwegian's IBF title, but in a classic case of sanctioning body hijinks, that opportunity fell by the wayside.

Layla McCarter (left) has a been a contender longer than any other notable female boxer, but the Las Vegas resident has only improved with age.

"The IBF ordered the mandatory and nothing ever went anywhere with that," McCarter said. "And then the IBF said, 'Well, you went to Mexico to fight while you were the mandatory, so she didn't have to fight you.' It's a loophole of some kind, but I'm not gonna sit on my ass and wait for you guys to make a fight. I've been waiting years already. When it happens, it happens, and if they don't want to make it, fine. I've got to stay busy in the meantime. I had an opportunity to fight in Mexico just to get the activity, I won, and nothing changed in my life. But they got out of it."

The win over Ericka Jeanette Hernandez in December 2017 was McCarter's 40th. She's since added victories over Victoria Cisneros and Eva Bajic, adding a pair of minor welterweight belts to her trophy case, but with a Braekhus bout apparently dead in the water, she's set her sights on a move back to lightweight and a showdown with Ireland's finest in Taylor.

"I figure if they (Team Braekhus) don't want it, they don't want it, so I'll stop pushing the issue and I'll just go after somebody else," McCarter said. "I'm thinking the next target would be Katie Taylor, because there's the potential to make money, it's at my weight and it would be nice to fight somebody my size for a change instead of these gargantuans at welterweight."

Hey, there can always be a fifth fight with Melissa Hernandez (a series in which McCarter has a 3-1 lead).

"Oh gosh, not again," laughs McCarter, a brief moment of levity to break up the frustration surrounding her search to land a defining fight before her career ends.

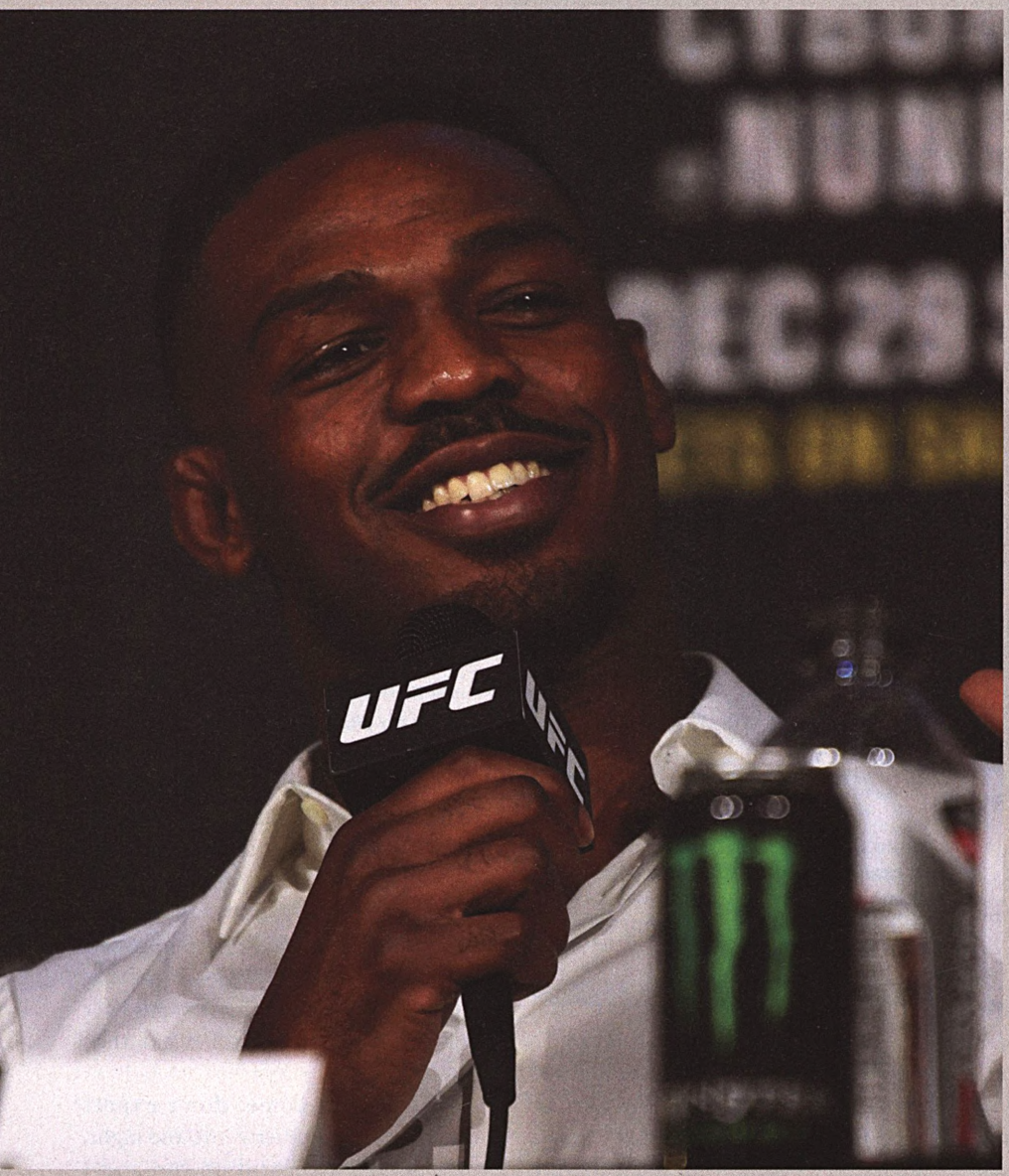
"I guess we'll see," she said of the immediate future. "I'm not getting any younger; this is the best I'll ever be, and I really hope I'll get that fight."

If it doesn't come, don't expect McCarter to go quietly into the night.

"I'm still here, still on top and I feel like I'm better than ever, and I actually feel stronger than ever," she said. "I have more punching power than I've ever had and I'm just ready to knock somebody out. But it's in everybody else's hands what happens with me. So I'll just keep fighting and doing my part to stay active as long as I can. And when the call comes, I'll be ready."

ENTER THE OCTAGON

THE RING'S REVIEW OF THE LATEST ACTION IN MIXED MARTIAL ARTS By **Gareth A Davies**



THE RETURN OF JON JONES

Fighting machine Jon Jones is back. Again. Let's hope his talent gets to remain and flourish this time. The Rochester, New York, fighter was on course just a couple of years ago to lay down a legacy in MMA akin to Muhammad Ali in boxing.

The "Greatest" tag really was his for the taking. Sublimely gifted, able to get his huge frame comfortably inside the UFC's 205-pound limit, "Bones" Jones had conquered all comers at light heavyweight, several legendary names in the process, and was on the point of marching up to the heavyweight division for a series of fights that would have, one by one, topped the one million mark in pay-per-view buys.

UFC President Dana White said that Jones is not "The Greatest" but "the greatest waste of talent" he has ever seen. White was lamenting not his own loss as a promoter, but the failure of great potential to be realized and laid down for posterity.

Every fight in Jones' resume of 24 contests brought something new from him, a mastery of a panoply of skills. A true decathlete of combat sports. But, as it has several times, it all just went horribly wrong. Personal strife and doping. Who knows why? The man had the world at his feet. He could have earned as much as Conor McGregor in the UFC Octagon. Up close and personal, Jones is great to deal with. The hardest thing is being his opponent.

Since 2015, here's the catalog of disaster – like a shopping list of horrors: The loss of his champion status came when the UFC stripped

Former UFC light heavyweight champ Jon Jones is facing what could be his last chance at redemption.

his title and suspended him after he was arrested on felony hit-and-run charges. The woman hit was pregnant (she suffered a broken arm), and a marijuana pipe was found in Jones' car.

The following year, back came Jones to claim the interim UFC light heavyweight championship against Ovince Saint Preux, but he was later stripped of the title after failing a United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) drug test (for the banned substances clomiphene and Letrozol) – and that came just days before a scheduled UFC 200 Las Vegas bout against his greatest rival, Daniel Cormier. Jones was suspended for one year after USADA ruled the positive test came from male enhancement pills, yet the authority still cited his negligence.

Jones came back again in July 2017 at UFC 214, defeating Cormier for a second time with a third-round KO, to reclaim the UFC's 205-pound crown, only for it to come to light that he had failed another USADA drug test (for the steroid metabolite Turinabol). It left him with a second annus horribilis. Jones was stripped, the victory over Cormier was revised to a no-contest, and due to it being a second doping violation, he was facing a potential four-year ban.

You might say Jones got lucky, or as sometimes happens, is lucky to be so good at what he does. Instead of 48 months, which would have taken away his prime years, he was given 15 months in the end after USADA deemed there was not enough evidence to show he had intentionally taken a banned substance (and also for his substantial cooperation in the investigation, which included his assistance in helping USADA bring forward UFC anti-doping policy violations by other individuals).

Jones has those two victories over Cormier, but it is his rival, in Jones' absence, who has taken full advantage. Cormier has usurped both the light heavyweight and, recently, also the UFC heavyweight crown. If Jones did not like the fella before – their hatred is well documented – he surely does not now.

The good news for Jones is that time has been served, and "Bones" is back at UFC 232 on December 29 in Las Vegas. He returns against Swede Alexander Gustafsson for a second fight – their first 5-round affair was one of the greatest back and forth battles ever witnessed in the sport – and it looks as if an earlier grudge match may likely emerge next year: with 41-year-old WWE star Brock Lesnar.

Jones stares down familiar foe Alexander Gustafsson for their UFC 232 main event.

Jones had seemingly set up the showdown with Lesnar, a former UFC heavyweight king, after that annulled defeat of Cormier at UFC 214, challenging the man-mountain to risk getting his "ass kicked by a guy that weighs 40 pounds less than" him. The gauntlet will likely be picked up for April, or even the big July event in Las Vegas. "I'd still like to fight Brock Lesnar," Jones told media crews recently. "Absolutely. Brock Lesnar is one of the most entertaining guys. People want to see him in the UFC against entertaining guys."

But Jones is steering clear of that trilogy fight with Cormier. He won't even entertain it. "There's no reason to grant him a fight. He got knocked out the last time we fought. I would fight 'DC' at heavyweight, but I feel like I have nothing to prove. I have beaten him twice, and I feel like fighting him at heavyweight is putting all the cards in his favor.

"I have nothing to prove to Daniel Cormier. I always say that a lot of my fighting is not personal. My goals are to be great, and it's not just about individual rivals. Me challenging Daniel Cormier would be making it a personal thing. If he had beaten me, I could see me challenging him, but I feel like I have done enough for my legacy."

Jones is right. For the legacy to st, there certainly is no need for Cormier. The only man who can beat Jon Jones is Jon Jones himself.

★★★

ONE CHAMPIONSHIP LOOKS FOR GAINS WITH ESPORTS AS WELL AS FIGHT SPORTS

How about this for a move from One Championship, Asia's largest martial arts company? Apart from signing record-holding former UFC flyweight champion Demetrious Johnson, brawling fan-favorite Eddie Alvarez and former UFC and Strikeforce women's bantamweight champ Miesha Tate (as an executive), its CEO, Chatri Sityodtong, has decided to invest $50 million to hold eSports tournaments, off the back of its martial arts events, with the sport for gamers to be broadcast live in 2019. It is all about capturing a generation. Some may critique that e-gaming is not sport, but eSports became a demonstration sport at the 2018 Asian Games and will become a medal event at the 2022 event. eSports also became a billion-dollar-a-year business in 2018. This year, One Championship showed a similar strand for pioneering zeal when it co-promoted WBC and Ring Magazine junior bantamweight champion Srisaket Sor Rungvisai on its October 6 "Kingdom of Heroes" card in Bangkok. Unusual, but smart business.

FIGHT ROUNDUP

RECENT ACTION AND FUTURE SIGNIFICANCE BY BRIAN HARTY

TEVIN FARMER TKO 5 JAMES TENNYSON

Oct. 20, TD Garden, Boston

Tevin Farmer took a risk with what he wore into the ring against James Tennyson, and not just in the potential protests and PETA campaigns wondering how many Muppets had to die to make his trunks. The real gamble of sartorial extravagance is that the stakes are no longer just win or lose, but are raised to where if you win, you're a boss with flair, and if you fail, you're considered a clown on top of a loser. And people like to smile when clowns fall down.

In the first defense of his IBF junior lightweight title, Farmer was facing a freshly crowned European champion in Tennyson. But despite being the taller man by a couple of inches, Tennyson was always coming up short when trying to find the southpaw from Philadelphia with his jab – so short that it often looked like he was aiming at nothing. Farmer, meanwhile, stung Tennyson with a sharp stick, swooped in to deliver lefts to the body and then nimbly hopped out of range. By the second round, Tennyson's right side already had the rosy-red glow of a spanking.

"The Assassin" gave up on the distance game and switched to crowding Farmer, which actually led to some eye-catching infighting with punch-for-punch exchanges. It was a better position for Tennyson in that he did manage to score some points, mainly with uppercuts, but also meant Farmer didn't need to travel as far to hit him, which he did often.

In the fourth round, Farmer shanked his foe below the ribs with a curved left and Tennyson went down after a brief delay. The Irishman somehow withstood a similar punch in the fifth. Farmer was having his way and enjoying it, though, and another left to the body soon dropped Tennyson into what a yoga teacher might call an "upward-facing dog in agony" position, unable to beat referee Arthur Mercante Jr.'s count.

It was an impressive stoppage from somebody with only an 18 percent knockout ratio. And yes, Farmer (27-4-1, 6 KOs) clowned a little, but he wore his Technicolor dreamshorts with flair and definitely emerged as the boss. In his post-fight interview, he dominated the microphone with the same enthusiasm, calling out everyone with a belt but reserving a special invitation for trashtalker-in-arms Gervonta Davis.

REGIS PROGRAIS UD 12 TERRY FLANAGAN

Oct. 27, Lakefront Arena, New Orleans

A week after Tevin Farmer's victory, Regis Prograis again put the weird and wonderful world of boxing fashion on display with his trademark "Rougarou" werewolf mask in New Orleans, though not seeing the rest of his Mardis Gras-style krewe behind him was unfortunate. (Note to the World Boxing Super Series: The minimalist production is very classy, but some of us would still prefer the chaotic drama of a small army pushing its way through the crowd over this corny "step into the light" thing, which is like The Lord of the Rings the way it drags on.) It was the local fighter's first match of the WBSS junior welterweight tournament, and he went in as the favorite to beat former lightweight titleholder Terry Flanagan, who made the journey from England following a split-decision loss to Maurice Hooker

Tevin Farmer's punching prowess and flair for fashion were on display during the first defense of his IBF junior lightweight title, a fifth-round stoppage of James Tennyson.

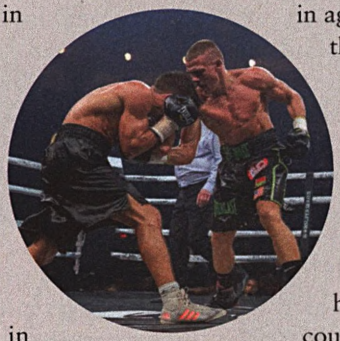
PHOTO BY STEPHEN MCCARTHY/SPORTSFILE

in his first fight at 140.

The two southpaws faced off with Prograis busy but relaxed while Flanagan moved around in quick dashes like a jumping spider. It looked competitive at first, but the combination of getting tagged with counterpunches when moving forward and peppered with jabs followed by straight lefts when stationary seemed to rattle the Brit's willingness to engage. Whatever odd hook Flanagan was able to land, Prograis took it in stride and responded with heavier blows driven atop what appear to be some very powerful legs.

By the fifth, the fight was transitioning into a performance as Prograis' head stayed in constant, hypnotic motion while his hands cycled around his waist as if drawing six-shooters from their holsters. He was clearly not feeling much of a threat from his opponent, and with that peace of mind his offense got more exaggerated and unpredictable in the way that creative boxing talent looks when allowed to flow unconsciously – the "Drunken Rougarou" version of Emanuel Augustus. Prograis' defense, too, relied more on instinctive moves to simply make his opponent miss, and those misses created opportunities for his perfect timing to shine. He used it to slip a left counter over Flanagan's jab and put the Brit down for the first time in his career.

Flanagan's reflexes and fighting spirit continued to be very good in the last four rounds, but Prograis had too many angles and too many punches to deal with, and in the end, the Englishman did well just to survive. The scores were 117-110, 118-109 and 119-108 for Prograis (23-0, 19 KOs), who will now meet Kiryl Relikh in the semifinals.



Yigit's chin held out against Baranchyk's hammer fists, but his face was another matter.

IVAN BARANCHYK TKO 7 ANTHONY YIGIT

Oct. 27, Lakefront Arena, New Orleans

The co-feature to Prograis-Flanagan was the WBSS 140-pound quarterfinal bout (as well as a contest for the vacant IBF title) between Russia's Ivan Baranchyk and Sweden's Anthony Yigit. They were only a year and a half apart in age, both undefeated, but they differed radically in the strength and style departments.

Baranchyk's punches moved Yigit when they landed, and they landed on his sides, his arms, his sternum, his neck – his head of course – and anywhere else the Russian's semi-accurate flailing could find him. Baranchyk threw some brutal combos as he careened forward – always forward – though sometimes missing wildly and seemingly on the verge of throwing himself to the canvas with the momentum of his own swings. He yelled a lot. There was something sloppy and near disastrous about him, like he was both bull and bullrider with only the most tenuous of grips.

The Swede's demeanor was serene by comparison, and he threaded punches through the thicket of Baranchyk's arms with precision to land well-timed, sophisticated attacks. Still, tight technique and accurate hands are great for heart surgeons and Olympians, the latter of which Yigit became in 2012, but you need a bit more than a scalpel when locked in a 20-by-20 room with a malfunctioning Terminator. Yigit's cheek was swelling by the second round and only got more Rocky-esque as the others went by, his eye eventually shrinking to a slit as he was tossed around by the force of Baranchyk's punches. Yigit showed a great chin, no doubt, and his technique stayed solid throughout, but the one thing he didn't have was power. And continuing to land punches without the power to matter further ruined his night, because it only seemed to frustrate and drive Baranchyk toward even rougher tactics – pushing, rabbit punching and leaning (for which he was penalized a point). It was a hopeless struggle and the damage to Yigit's face was serious, so the fight was mercifully called off after the seventh round.

To be fair to Baranchyk (19-0, 12 KOs), if he was all testosterone and no skill, he probably would've had more trouble with Yigit. He's far from being a brainless machine, though, and has a respectable array of punches with the amateur pedigree and speed to make them a major challenge for anyone who faces him. And that ridiculous aggression level is no joke. There was never a fighter with a more appropriate nickname, and if "The Beast" can manage to tighten up his technique, show some mature control and still maintain the energy, he'll be a nightmare. Scotland's Josh Taylor is up next.

DANIEL JACOBS SD 12 SERGIY DEREVYANCHENKO

Oct. 27, Theater at Madison Square Garden, New York

You'll often hear it said that Daniel Jacobs should be a star. Not just in boxing, where everybody respects his talents, but a crossover personality with household recognition for both his skills and his life story. There's always something that keeps "The Miracle Man" (so named for overcoming spinal cancer) on the outside, though. The time to break through was after his first-round blitz of Peter Quillin in 2015, but a pointless rematch with Sergio Mora, a close decision loss to Gennady Golovkin and a pair of UDs over solid but largely unknown characters have left him still in search

of something that will capture the wider public's imagination. And unfortunately, a competitive fight against a former sparring partner doesn't cut it either. Nevermind the fact that Jacobs has removed the "0" from his last three opponents' records; he needs a dance partner named Canelo to force his way into pop culture.

On these pages, however, we can appreciate that the former sparring partner was a heavy-handed Ukrainian Olympian named Sergiy Derevyanchenko. The sparring (around 300 rounds of it, by Derevyanchenko's reckoning) was a result of having shared trainer Andre Rozier, who worked Jacobs' corner in this fight, and that familiarity was evident in the wariness the boxers showed for each other's capabilities. They got past it pretty quickly, though. With 20 seconds left in the first round, Jacobs delivered a right hand on a rainbow trajectory to a spot above Derevyanchenko's left ear, hammering him downward like a nail to where his gloves touched the canvas for a knockdown.

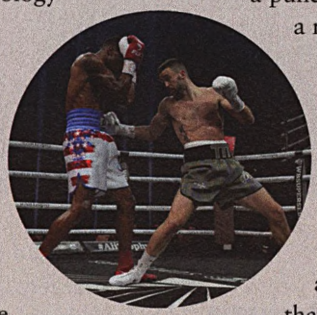
There wasn't enough time for a follow-up, and it would prove to be the contest's only 10-8 round, though Derevyanchenko landed a leg-wobbling combo in the second that probably evened the psychological score somewhat. Jacobs was his usual self: fast hands, fast feet, good power, difficult to hit cleanly. Derevyanchenko was the aggressor throughout and backed up his pressure with some powerful hooks and straight rights that had Jacobs in reverse and switching stances to try and create a buffer. However, by the Ukrainian's own admission afterward, a bit less headhunting in favor of body punches might've gone a long way.

It was a good, close battle all the way. The scores were 114-113 for Derevyanchenko (12-1, 10 KOs) and two cards with 115-112 for Jacobs (35-2, 29 KOs). The win earned Jacobs the vacant IBF middleweight title, but again, without any bad blood or … just blood, the event was probably too subtle to create the kind of buzz Jacobs' team is looking for. He's now fighting for Eddie Hearn, though, and Hearn has been the chief architect in building up DAZN as a driving force in boxing's broadcast renaissance. DAZN just pledged a boatload of money to be the exclusive carrier of Canelo Alvarez's fights. That at least puts the boxers in the same room, so we'll see if it gets them into the same ring.

JOSH TAYLOR TKO 7 RYAN MARTIN

Nov. 3, SSE Hydro, Glasgow, Scotland

For any boxing coaches out there wondering how to explain the concept of body punching, your search for a teaching aid is over. Those interested in psychology might also find the video of this fight interesting, because it plainly shows a man who, for whatever dark reason, has an unquenchable hatred of all abdominal muscles and the organs they conceal. Nothing else could explain the way Josh Taylor relentlessly attacked Ryan Martin's midsection in their quarterfinal match of the WBSS 140-pound tournament.



Taylor's body attack was key in disarming and outclassing Martin.

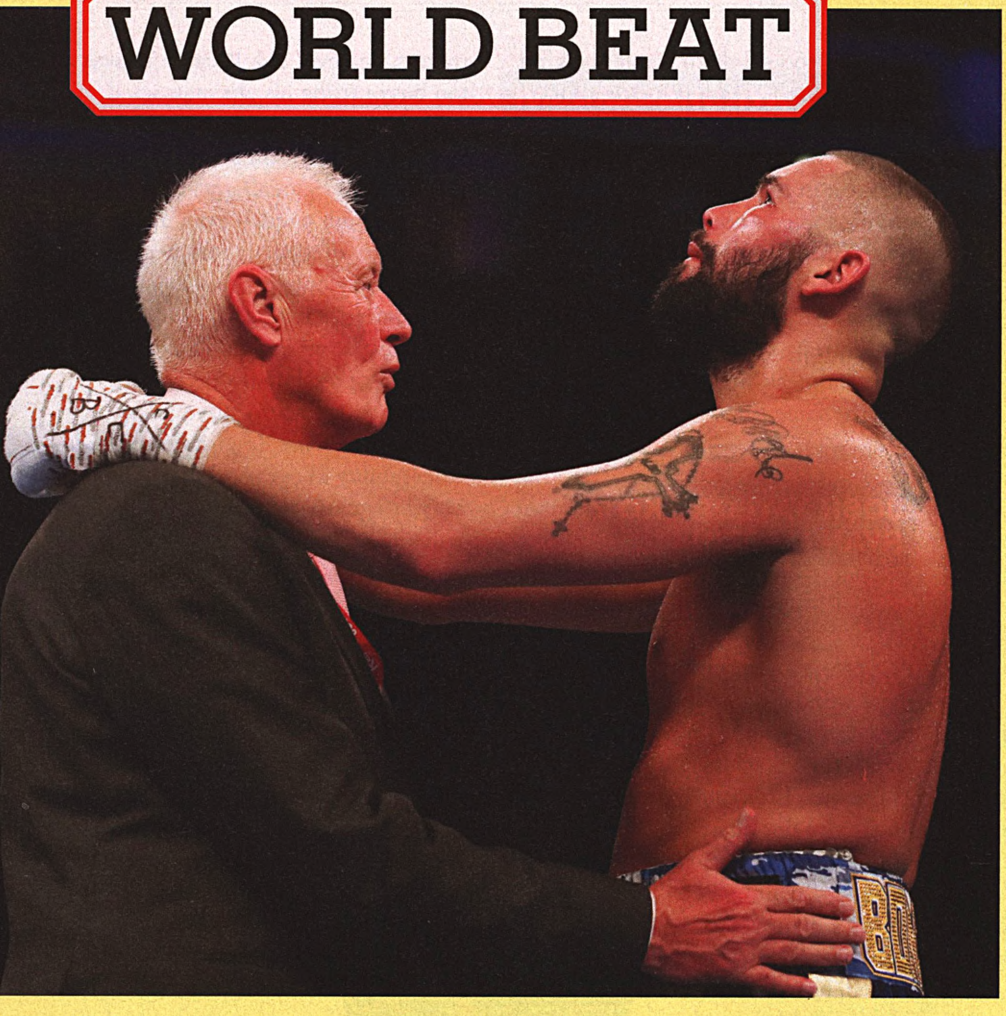
It started routinely enough as Taylor, whose mid-2017 stoppage of Ohara Davies started a home-soil winning streak that has taken him to the uppermost echelon of his division, showed his speed with an active jab and a few hooks downstairs. But even though his hands (and feet) were fast, Taylor's punches didn't look all that heavy; his speed was so compact that he almost seemed to snatch more than strike. Plus we knew Martin had a lot of his own speed, and in the couple times he unfurled his jab we saw the length of his arm and knew things would get interesting once he let his hands go. But in the coming rounds, he never did. Because he was too busy getting his abs massacred.

Taylor used every kind of punch there is to hit Martin below the chest … hooks, straight, all angles in-between, both hands – even uppercuts (and forget that part about heaviness, because they only got more vicious and numerous with each round). The southpaw Scotsman didn't exclusively aim low, either, but always stayed mindful that Martin's attempts to deploy his defense downstairs created vulnerability above. And even when Martin's guard stayed high, Taylor snuck punches around it or between it, and on the rare occasions when the American tried to mount an offensive, he was quickly countered into retreat. But Taylor always returned to chop away at Martin's torso.

It was not a body punch that ended the fight, though – or really much of a punch at all. Taylor threw a rare inaccurate left that went behind Martin's head and seemed to land more as a push than a punch, but Martin turned away, pawing the back of his skull, and doubled over against the ropes. Seeing that his foe was still on his feet, Taylor charged forward and delivered two final punches to – where else? – Martin's body. Referee Victor Loughlin immediately stepped in to end the fight.

The stoppage was definitely quick and Martin (22-1, 12 KOs) could've continued, but he was bleeding, bruised and in the process of being overwhelmed, so nobody protested. This means that the 27-year-old Taylor (14-0, 12 KOs) will now face Ivan Baranchyk in the semifinals, a potential barnburner. Both were highly aggressive in their respective wins, but Taylor will bring the more refined skills along with some of the power that Anthony Yigit lacked. It could be enough to get him into the final round, where he would most likely find Regis Prograis.

WORLD BEAT



Matchroom founder Barry Hearn commiserated with Tony Bellew after what would be the last fight of the former titleholder's career.

U.K.

BY GARETH A DAVIES

FAREWELL TO THE BOMBER

Tony Bellew's career finale against Aleksandr Usyk was raw, emotional and thrilling. The timeline for this swan song battle had involved a honeymoon and talk of divorce in the same breath, until finally the popular Liverpool fighter called time on his 11-year, 34-fight resume on November 10 after an eighth-round stoppage defeat. Bellew and his gifted Ukrainian opponent were adversaries, but they brought – together – closure to a career that glittered at the end, on different levels, for different reasons.

It went back to July 21, and Greece, for Bellew. He had promised his wife, Rachael, and three sons that he had retired. He was 35 and had beaten David Haye twice at heavyweight. More, he had won the WBC cruiserweight title at Goodison Park, home of his beloved Everton Football Club, in 2016. He had earned millions. Even more unlikely, he had starred in the Hollywood movie Creed, the seventh film in the Rocky franchise. "The fat Scouser (Liverpudlian) with a big gob," as he calls himself – the son of a bank robber and the grandson of a policeman – had become a Rocky Balboa-like figure himself.

But that night of July 21 in Mykonos, on honeymoon with Rachael, he had sneaked a look at the night's boxing on his phone. Usyk had just unified all four of the world cruiserweight belts and the Ring Magazine championship in Moscow in the final of the World Boxing Super Series – the first fighter to do so.

Among Usyk's first words after being presented with the Ali Trophy was Bellew's name. It was a challenge the Briton could not back away from. Without hesitation, he speed-dialed his promoter, Eddie Hearn.

Less than a month later, the fight was on. Bellew was back, for one last time.

Rachael had told him divorce was the only option if he didn't quit afterward. And they have been together since they were teenagers. He called this "the hardest fight I will ever have," and so it proved to be against one of the sport's leading pound-for-pound fighters, who had claimed the Olympic heavyweight title in London and remains unbeaten as a professional, something of a machine in the ring. Bellew had threatened in the build-up to pull Usyk into "a street fight," but actually produced his most accomplished boxing performance – fitting indeed for the occasion – and was ahead on the cards before tiring late in the sixth round, with the stalking Usyk employing his left hook to end the dance.

Incidentally, Usyk's response to me when he was told that "a street fight" was being touted by his opponent, was, "How do you think I got into boxing? By having so many street fights growing up in a ghetto with drugs dealers and prostitutes. But this is boxing. I grew up having to fight and defend myself as a kid. Life was tough growing up, and boxing was a way out of that."

The savvy Usyk will now step up to heavyweight. The debate will rage as to whether he has become the greatest cruiserweight in history. Maybe he is ... maybe it's Evander

Holyfield. But let's see what Usyk does up with the big boys first. Perhaps then we can resume the Holyfield comparison. I reckon, though, that both at their peak, Usyk might have outpointed Evander.

But the last word here to Bellew: The cruiserweight titleholder from Toxteth produced arguably the best technical performance of his career in Manchester, another night with British fans filling an arena with passion, atmosphere and song.

Bellew's retirement came without hesitation after the fight. It was open, honest, tearful. "Tony Bellew died tonight; it's Anthony that's left. No one who knows me calls me Tony, I've always been Anthony to them. Tony Bellew exists only for these cameras. It's definitely over," he said through a sob or two. "You'll not see me in a ring again. Now I just want to be normal."

Bellew declared his personal triumph: "I have won. I sit here as a loser, heartbroken, but I have won in life. When I left school – or, rather, when I was expelled from school for hitting a kid who had disrespected a teacher – I had nothing, with nowhere to go. Where I'm from, it really means that. Now my family are millionaires. I never dreamed this would be possible."

Bellew has become a folkloric figure for British boxing fans through his honesty, warrior spirit and authenticity, and bows out as a deeply respected boxer and man, and a working-class hero both inside and outside of the ring.

★★★

In Sofia, Bulgaria, on October 27, Hughie Fury's bid to fight Anthony Joshua for a world title was thwarted by hometown heavyweight Kubrat Pulev, who won comprehensively on the cards. Pulev took full advantage after a stiff second-round jab opened up an old cut above the left eye of the British fighter (it was originally sustained during training camp, which may have affected the game plan).

The sojourn to the Balkans was always likely to be a tough assignment for Fury, but Pulev's command of the jab, roared on by partisan support, broke Fury's face – and his dreams of chasing a world title. For now.

Pulev handed 24-year-old Fury his second career defeat – the first a WBO title-challenge loss to Joseph Parker in 2017, with this contest an eliminator for the IBF belt held by Joshua – the judges returning a unanimous verdict of 117-111, 118-110 and 115-113 in the 37-year-old's favor.

Pulev will be among the outside contenders to face Joshua in 2019. "It wasn't my night – the cut I suffered a few weeks ago opened up and it affected my performance," said Fury.

★★★

In East London on the same night that Fury fought Pulev, north Londoner John Ryder finished previously unbeaten Andrey Sirotkin with a body shot in the seventh round at the Copper Box. Ryder had to be patient, but gradually overwhelmed the awkward Russian's style, working through a bad cut brought about by Sirotkin's reckless, head-first assaults in the sixth round. Ryder – known as "The Gorilla" – could now be in the midst of world title challenges as the next mandated opponent for Callum Smith's WBA 168-pound belt.

Gareth A Davies is Boxing Correspondent of the London Telegraph.

Heavyweight veteran Kubrat Pulev earned another title shot with a unanimous decision over Hughie Fury.

Ryota Murata was unable to defend himself against Rob Brant's right cross. Will Murata face Brant in a rematch or retire?

JAPAN

BY NICK SKOK

Japanese boxing took a major beating when megastar Ryota Murata was handled by American fringe contender Rob Brant on October 20 in Las Vegas. The underdog threw the second-highest number of punches ever recorded by CompuBox for a middleweight fight (1,262) and in doing so, gave the audience an unexpected show of force over 12 rounds. A healthy mixture of fans, high rollers and sponsors had come over to Sin City, all betting their guy would take care of business, but instead they witnessed what could've been Murata's last fight as a professional boxer.

Murata's training camp in Tokyo started late due to an illness and was marked by lethargic sparring, perhaps having not fully recovered to the degree needed for world-level preparations, which added to a long list of warning signs that Brant's chances were better than the odds bookmakers gave him (+500). There were no excuses from Murata, who praised Brant and admitted his own faults in not being able to handle or adjust to what was an absolute onslaught.

In press row at the Park MGM, observers murmured that there was no way Brant could keep up the pace for another round. But he kept it up and beat Murata by scores of 119-109, 119-109 and 118-110. The result upset plans to stage what would've been a massive Tokyo affair with Gennady Golovkin, which would have been a massive event in Japan that ESPN would have broadcast in the U.S.

Murata (14-2, 11 knockouts), will have a career and plenty of options in his life after boxing, and that's lucky for him, considering that the contingent of Japanese media present were already asking about retirement scenarios following the loss. Whether Murata exercises his contractual rematch clause with Brant or not is a bit moot, as he will seemingly never reach the equivalent of his Olympic gold medal at the professional level, barring a series of drastic events over the next 12 months. Does a 32-year-old fighter who has made in excess of $5 million annually from endorsements that include Nike and McDonald's (a precise figure from over 45 endorsement deals could not be independently verified) and the lifetime recognition as a national hero from his 2012 gold medal accomplishment have the motivation, or even the necessity, to attempt another title run?

★★★

Ohashi Gym is looking to go abroad once again, vowing to showcase their crown jewel, Naoya Inoue, stateside in his next contest, the semifinal round of the World Boxing Super Series. Inoue was in Orlando in October to witness what gym founder Hideyuki Ohashi told Ring Magazine prior to the fight would be their toughest opponent option, Emmanuel Rodriguez. Rodriguez successfully (though barely) defended his title by split decision against Jason Moloney.

As Japanese boxing becomes more popular with the West, standout fighters are more willing to go abroad for action. This was evident in the case of Ryota Murata again going to Las Vegas and now also with Inoue, who too is looking to make a return trip to the U.S. Kazuto Ioka has no current plans for returning home for any future bouts.

Todd Duboef, president of Top

Rank, told The Ring of his interest in acquiring rights to air future title fights from Japan for the ESPN+ platform. James Rushton, formerly CEO of DAZN and now acting chief revenue officer for DAZN Group (formerly the Perform Group), told The Ring, "We will look to invest more of that money into boxing. No doubt about that." Statements like these are exciting news for fans of the boxing community in Japan.

Contact Nick Skok on Twitter @NoSparring.

PHILIPPINES

BY RYAN SONGALIA

It's hard to remember what Nonito Donaire was before Guillermo Rigondeaux exposed all his flaws and vulnerabilities in such a public fashion back in 2013. He was already a unified champion at 122 pounds, but hadn't looked like the killer he had been at previous weights. Donaire certainly hadn't been the fighter he was at 118 pounds, where he had made a brief pit stop for a year, beginning in 2010. There was the bloody knockout of Volodymyr Sydorenko, followed by the frightening 2011 KO of the Year, when one left hook made Fernando Montiel convulse on the floor.

"I think that if I [had stayed at 118] I would have kept the title until this day," said Donaire. But that wouldn't have been enough for him.

"I'm not the type of guy to stay in one division just to prove it. I just want to keep fighting and keep challenging myself in that way."

There were bigger fights to be had at the higher weights, though it often meant Donaire would be the smaller fighter in the ring, and the opponents could take the same shots that would've felled men in lighter divisions. His decision to step back down to 118 pounds on November 3 was met with some skepticism, but Donaire never doubted he could make the weight again. That is, if he had a reason to try. That reason was the World Boxing Super Series.

At age 36, Donaire (39-5, 25 knockouts) is a bantamweight titleholder for a second time, though the circumstances under which he defeated Ryan Burnett in Scotland were far from conclusive. Burnett went to his knees after throwing a right hand late in the fourth, clutching his side. "I can't throw a punch," Burnett told his trainer once he was back in the corner. The fight was waived off. Burnett, his right oblique muscle torn partially from the bone, was no longer unbeaten.

The buried headline of the fight is that, despite the issue not having been settled, Donaire had appeared as explosive and accurate as he had been in several years. Part of it was that he had trained at a lighter weight, and part of it was because he didn't have to worry about getting hit by someone outweighing him by several pounds.

Training with Brandon Woods in Las Vegas helped him get his strategy together, and for at least four rounds, he more than held his own against an undefeated fighter a decade younger than himself.

"I felt so much faster; that's the biggest key for me," said Donaire.

Heading into the 18th year of his pro career, Donaire isn't taking his title and riding off into the sunset. He'll next be facing WBO titleholder Zolani Tete in the tournament semifinals. The winner of that fight will face the winner between IBF beltholder Emmanuel Rodriguez and Naoya Inoue, giving Donaire plenty of incentive to keep his weight down.

South Africa's Tete has won 12 straight since his last defeat in 2012 and is the sort of rangy, defensive southpaw that has given Donaire trouble in the past. Donaire sees it another way, however.

"My style is something that his style has problems with," said Donaire.

However his last fight ended, Donaire knows he remains too dangerous to count out.

"It's hard to overlook me because I always have that one-punch knockout, especially in this division."

At age 36, Nonito Donaire once again holds a major world bantamweight title.

Filipino veteran Donnie Nietes' dream of becoming a four-division titleholder is still alive.

★★★

Donnie Nietes will get a second straight shot at becoming a four-division titleholder when he faces Kazuto Ioka for the vacant WBO junior bantamweight belt on New Year's Eve in Macau. Nietes had been denied in his last attempt when his fight against Aston Palicte ended in a controversial draw. The deal was announced at the WBO Convention in Panama, leaving Palicte on the outside with only the offer of an eliminator to face the winner. Nonito Donaire, who has trained alongside Nietes at the ALA Gym, says he hadn't seen enough of Ioka to make a solid prediction but feels a fourth world title would just be "icing on the cake" for the 36-year-old from Negros Occidental, who he says has already established himself as a "historical figure in Philippine boxing."

Donaire adds, however, that it took Nietes longer to be recognized for his abilities because he didn't face the few big names that passed through his weight range, notably Roman "Chocolatito" Gonzalez and Inoue, and says his promoter "groomed him to stay champion." Still, he believes Nietes is "underappreciated in terms of his capability and his stature as a champion."

★★★

After plenty of speculation, Premier Boxing Champions announced it had signed Manny Pacquiao, soon to be 40, to a deal. This comes after Pacquiao's self-promoted knockout win over Lucas Matthysse once again spiked interest in the National Fist. Pacquiao's first fight under the PBC banner will be a January 19 Showtime Pay-Per-View main event against Adrien Broner in Las Vegas, with the hopes of securing a big-money rematch with Floyd Mayweather Jr.

Despite Pacquiao's age, Donaire believes he still has plenty of fight left in him if he can remain dedicated.

"It's never a question of his ability – more a question of his focus," said Donaire. "He's always gonna be a very tremendous fighter and puncher, and I think he's gonna beat Broner because of that. But again, that's the only question that goes through people's minds: Is he focused enough?"

SOUTH AFRICA

BY DROEKS MALAN

East London, a harbor town in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa, is boxing crazy; the sport surpasses even soccer in popularity. It is home to the most passionate and knowledgeable fans in the country and deserves the "Mecca of Boxing" title that has been bestowed on it over the years. The Orient Theatre, an unlikely arena for boxing with the capacity of hosting a mere 1,500 mortals, is the temple of that Holy City of Pugilism. A slew of world champions, local as well as from the rest of the country, have honed their craft at the famed venue. They are too numerous to list, but Vuyani Bungu, Welcome Ncita, Mbulelo Botile, Simphíwe Vetyeka and Zolani Tete are the most well-known on the international scene.

It is therefore appropriate that the man touted as the future of South African boxing, junior lightweight Azinga "Golden Boy" Fuzile, took a step-up fight at The Orient when he faced former two-time IBF junior lightweight champion Malcolm

Klassen in only his 12th pro outing.

Fuzile started the first round sizing up his vastly more experienced opponent, boxing patiently from his awkward, sideways southpaw stance. A pair of straight lefts caught Klassen flush, and a follow-up flurry punctuated by a right hook sent the former titleholder to the canvas. He got up and gathered himself but seemed to wobble when Fuzile landed another straight left at the bell.

Fuzile continued his clinical assault in the second round, digging to Klassen's body. That prompted a retaliatory explosion of punches to the head and body, to which Fuzile responded by moving away and sticking his tongue out. The crowd was clearly starting to feel it as the venue erupted in song while the local hero continued to pick off Klassen, using deft footwork to get out of the way every time the 36-year-old veteran tried to mount his once-explosive offense.

The writing was on the wall by the third round, when Fuzile put Klassen flat on his back with a beautifully timed left uppercut. Once again, Klassen got up and Fuzile continued punishing him with hooks to the head and body while avoiding Klassen's increasingly desperate lunges. Fuzile even planted himself in the corner at times, punching Klassen while making him miss.

A left in the beginning of the fourth stanza prompted Klassen to turn his back and call "No mas." It is hard to blame him. He was taking a pointless beating and has done more than his bit for South African boxing. He announced his retirement afterward.

As for Azinga Fuzile, the plan is to steer him toward the IBF title held by Tevin Farmer by the end of next year, according to new manager/trainer Colin Nathan. Junior lightweight is a strong division with names like Gervonta Davis, Miguel Berchelt and Farmer at the top, but those guys will do well not to sleep on this 22-year-old youngster.

Although there are some crinkles that the next couple of fights should iron out, there were moments in this fight that Fuzile reminded me of a smaller, prime version of Sergio Martinez.

★★★

With the WBC-ordered eliminator against Tsubasa Koura not materializing, No. 5-ranked strawweight Simphiwe Khonco will see action on December 2 when he takes on Filipino fringe contender Joey Canoy at the Orient Theatre. In his only other trip to South Africa, in 2017, Canoy was stopped by Hekkie Budler in the eighth round of a 108-pound bout.

★★★

The rematch between Budler, the current Ring and WBA junior flyweight champ, and Ryoichi Taguchi has been canceled because of the Japanese star's trouble making 108 pounds, but fans of the little guys need not fear, as an equally attractive matchup is earmarked for New Year's Eve in Macau. The final contracts still need to be signed at the time of writing, but the plan is for Budler to defend his championship against undefeated former IBF strawweight titleholder Hiroto Kyoguchi in what should be a barnburner.

IBF flyweight boss Moruti Mthalane will also make a voluntary defense of his title on the same night if everything goes to plan.

This will mark only the second time that two South Africans will be defending their world titles on the same card on foreign soil, the first being back in 1990 when Brian Mitchell and Welcome Ncita successfully defended their respective titles in Aosta, Italy. Mitchell retained his WBA junior lightweight title with a decision over Frankie Mitchell and Ncita knocked out Gerardo Lopez in eight rounds in defense of his IBF junior featherweight crown.

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ROAD WARRIOR

On September 27, 1968, Japan's Shozo Saijo won the WBA featherweight title from the vastly more experienced Raul Rojas. Saijo traveled some 5,500 miles to the Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles for his first world title bout, securing the victory with a 15-round unanimous decision after flooring the home fighter in the sixth. This was Saijo's second win over Rojas, whom he'd outpointed four months earlier in a non-title affair held at the Olympic Auditorium. Saijo would make five successful defenses of his title before losing it to Antonio Gomez in September 1971. He retired after that fight with a record of 29-7-2 (8 knockouts). RING

COMING UP

Jose Uzcategui (left) and Caleb Plant pose with former heavyweight champ Lennox Lewis, who will be part of the Fox broadcast of their IBF super middleweight title bout.

JANUARY

JAN. 13 – Jose Uzcategui vs. Caleb Plant, super middleweights (for Uzcategui's IBF title), Los Angeles (Fox).

JAN. 19 – Manny Pacquiao vs. Adrien Broner, welterweights, Las Vegas (Showtime PPV).

JAN. 26 – Keith Thurman vs. Josesito Lopez, welterweights (for Thurman's WBA title), Brooklyn, New York (Fox). Also fighting: Adam Kownacki vs. Gerald Washington, heavyweights.

FEBRUARY

FEB. 2 – Eleider Alvarez vs. Sergey Kovalev, light heavyweights (for Alvarez's WBO title), Frisco, Texas (ESPN).

FEB. 16 – Leo Santa Cruz vs. Miguel Flores, featherweights (for Santa Cruz's WBA title), Los Angeles (Fox).

FEB. 23 – Anthony Dirrell vs. Avni Yildirim, super middleweights (for vacant WBC title), Minneapolis, Minnesota (Fox Sports 1).

MARCH

MARCH 9 – Shawn Porter vs. Yordenis Ugas, welterweights (for Porter's WBC title), Las Vegas (Fox).

MARCH 16 – Errol Spence Jr. vs. Mikey Garcia, welterweights (for Spence's IBF title), Arlington, Texas (Fox PPV).

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